The Superhero in Post-9/11 Marvel Comics and Filipino Film

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This paper explores the use of the superhero as a symbol and how it comes to represent a culture's morals. By focusing on the specific time period of post-9/11, it makes a comparative reading of the mainstream expression of superheroes in American and Philippine cultures, thereby building discourse on both the superhero as a symbol and its use in expressing each culture's moral values.

Keywords: Superhero, comics, 9/11, Filipino film, Marvel Comics

INTRODUCTION

The superhero has been a fundamental part of many people's childhoods. But after a certain age, they are abandoned or even made an object of ridicule and embarrassment. One accusation is that the superhero is merely the manifestation of the adolescent male power fantasy, where the puny underdog turns into a muscular man in spandex beating up their bullies and getting the pretty girl. All of this points to the common belief that superhero comics are "of necessity formulaic, masculinist, melodramatic, and morally reductive" (Hatfield, Heer, & Worcester, 2013, Introduction). Though there are a good number of comic books that suffer from those flaws, the entire genre, across media, offers many other readings and opportunities for discourse.

This paper will examine how the superhero genre has been used in post-9/11 culture. The popularity of the genre in this time period provides for much content that can be studied. The paper will study American superhero comics and Filipino superhero films to see the directions that the genre has taken with the two cultures in question.

In studying American superhero comics, this paper will attempt to show how the filter of the superhero genre invites a popular audience to engage in complex discourse. In particular, it will examine a number of major Marvel comic events after 9/11. The paper will explore the ways that contemporary political issues are adapted and interpreted in these comics. Through an examination of these comic books, the paper will show how the superhero genre has been utilized to regain a sense of control and security after the traumatic events of 9/11.

After establishing the trend in mainstream American superhero comics, the paper will study trends in mainstream Filipino superhero movies. The change in medium being studied occurs because it is in Filipino mainstream film and not comics that the superhero has appeared.

The paper will turn a critical eye to Filipino superhero films produced in the same time period. It will question Filipino interpretations of the superhero. Where the Marvel comics attempt to engage current events and contemporary social and political concerns, the Filipino superhero films employ narratives that introduce their heroes. The paper will read these as origin stories. It will examine the discourse created by these origin stories, exposing how the Filipino superhero removes power and control from viewers and marginalizes its already impoverished characters.

By studying the superhero genre in these two contexts, the paper will show important differences. The differences found would reveal the issues and concerns of the culture and perhaps more importantly how the two cultures create very different discourse with the genre.

MARVEL'S POST-9/11 COMICS

The tragic events of September 11, 2001 have reframed the way that we view the world. Moulton (2012) says:

> 9/11 was unlike anything that had ever happened before. It defied comprehension or description. A disaster of its magnitude hadn't

> seemed possible in the pre-9/11 world—at least, it hadn't seemed possible in the real world. The explosions and a ruthless enemy with seemingly limitless power felt more like a comic book, movie, or novel than cold, hard truth. The only metaphors that seemed to do it justice—the only words that came close to describing the horror of that day—came from the realm of fantasy. But 9/11 wasn't fiction. It was harsh, terrible reality that shook the very foundations of the United States and forever changed the world. (p. 1)

Grant Morrison (2012) explains that the terrorist attack was something that had been imagined many times in film and comics. He enumerates a number of scenes in comic books that he and his contemporaries wrote weeks and months before 9/11 that portrayed hijacked planes crashing into buildings. Superhero comic creators had been imagining it, and after it happened, superhero comic creators used the filter of their genre to address the event and its aftermath (ch. 22).

Superhero comics, at their best, operate on the level of metaphor. Douglas Wolk (2007) explains, "Superhero comics are, by their nature, larger than life, and what is useful and interesting about their characters is that they provide bold metaphors for discussing ideas or reifying abstractions into narrative fiction" (ch. 4).

We can see this at work in a number of significant superhero books from this time period. This paper will look briefly at some highlights from a few books: Amazing Spider-Man #36, The Ultimates, and the event comics Secret War, Civil War, and Secret Invasion. We will be discussing the texts in chronological order. Rather than applying in-depth analyses on each of these books, this paper will point out significant scenes, panels, or lines that show how these books attempt to address, question, or reframe issues arising in post-9/11 America.

Superhero comics portray the events through the filter of the genre, but they also apply genre conventions which help the readers reestablish a sense of control and understanding.

Terry Kading (Laughlin, 2005) explains the relevance of the superhero comic to a reading of 9/11:

> The superhero comic, in response to 9/11, provides a distinct medium from which to reflect on and explore the fears, insecurities,

> and varied individual reactions generated by the attacks. On the one hand, there is the ability to recapture the terrifying and horrific images of 9/11 through vibrant colors and striking detail, a style that has been perfected through decades of expressing the dramatic action between superheroes and supervillains to date. On the other hand, there is room to present commentary on thoughts, emotions, and insights as the events unfold, thus rendering a novel appreciation of 9/11 and the post-9/11 environment. Through this medium, we are first able to view 9/11 from the vantage of a superhero, allowing for an unusual but respectful retrospective on that violent day and placing the events of 9/11 against the experiences of beings who thought they had seen everything. (p. 219)

Kading further states that perhaps it is apt to examine the events through the lens of the superhero because the 9/11 attack can be classified as an act of supervillainy (pp. 215–217).

We first examine Amazing Spider-Man #36 (Straczynski, Romita, & Hanna, 2011), a comic book that was written to directly address the 9/11 attack. It is also one of the most widely cited comic books in relation to the events.

Before going directly into the comic book, we look at the importance of choosing Spider-Man as the character through which we witness the event. While his popularity, as the most recognizable of Marvel's superheroes, would have definitely been a factor, his position among Marvel's superhero pantheon is also telling and adds meaning to the book.

The Marvel Comics universe has numerous divisions and modes of classification. This can become convoluted, and a lot of it is the province of the fanboy. For the purposes of this paper, we will go into a short discussion of power levels. Superheroes can be grouped according to their power levels, and these power levels usually dictate the kinds of enemies that they will be fighting. For example, Marvel has cosmic-level heroes like Thor, Hyperion, The Hulk, and the Silver Surfer. These characters can fight aliens and engage in intergalactic conflicts.

Spider-Man is considered a street-level hero. His powers, while substantial, are most apt to handling street thugs and super-criminals who attack New York. He might face more powerful enemies, but these usually involve him joining a superhero team-up. Further, Spider-Man, despite

having superpowers, remains an extremely relatable character because of the everyday problems that he deals with, like having to come up with rent money and juggling work and relationships. It is from this more human and relatable perspective of Spider-Man that we are retold the story of the attacks.

Smith and Goodrum (2011) point out that, through reenacting the events within the superhero narrative, a healing process can occur. The reenactment allows the reader to relive the trauma but to reframe the trauma so that, in the process of retelling, the understanding of the narrative can be rewritten. Through the conventions of the superhero, the element of control over the event, or at least of ongoing events, can be inserted (pp. 488, 490).

In the aftermath of the events of 9/11, there was a struggle to understand why it happened. This is reflected in the opening page of the comic book, as Spider-Man looks down at the crash site from across town and holds his head in his hands, and we read the captions, "Some things are beyond words. Beyond comprehension."

To further the sense of disbelief and inability to process, we get the exchanges of the next two pages. Two civilians are running, and they scream to Spider-Man, "Where were you?!" and "How could you let this happen?" He answers:

> How do you say we didn't know? We couldn't know. We couldn't imagine. Only madmen could contain the thought, execute the act, fly the planes. The sane world will always be vulnerable to madmen, because we cannot go where they go to conceive of such things.

The comic book expresses confusion and disbelief until Spider-Man gets to the site. Once there, he joins the rest of the relief workers, the "true heroes." From here, we get the different ways in which heroism was enacted that day, from the relief workers in the wreckage to the passengers of Flight 93.

The book is never triumphalist. It explores the depths of sadness that are inseparable from the event. In fact, it has been faulted for including supervillains among those mourning. But Grant Morrison (2012) explains the relevance of villains like Dr. Doom, who one would have expected might have perpetrated such an attack, "…here, he was sobbing with the best of them, as representative not of evil but of Marvel Comics' collective shock, struck dumb and moved to hand-drawn tears…" (ch. 22).

The book ends with a sense of overcoming and expression of internal strength. There is a rousing speech about rebuilding. This is the reframing; after having reenacted the horrors, it gives the reader a sense of power and strength: "They knocked down two tall towers. Graft now their echo onto your spine. Become girders and glass, stone and steel, so that when the world sees you, it sees them. And stand tall. Stand tall."

We find similar expressions of solidarity in Captain America by John Ney Rieber and John Cassaday (2002). Captain America is the most overtly patriotic of popular superheroes, and he is often used to display the best of the American Dream and what is has to offer. Cap will appear in a number of iterations throughout this paper, as different creators utilize him to make their statements about 9/11.

The Rieber/Cassaday Captain America supposedly embodies the need to overcome tragedy and the need to return to the American dream and American values. He is from a poor neighborhood. Through persistence, hard work, and technology, he becomes a superior individual who fights for good and follows an unwavering moral code committed to the ideals of the founding fathers. While Cap defends a Muslim man from attackers who have singled him out because of his religion, we get these captions:

> We can *hunt them down*. We can scour every *bloodstained trace* of their terror from the Earth. We can turn every stone they've ever *touched* to dust, and every blade of grass to *ash*. And it won't *matter*. We've got to be *stronger* than we've *ever* been—as a *people*. As a *nation*. We have to be America. Or they've *won*.

These issues of Spider-Man and Captain America, written in response to 9/11, show the positive response to the traumatic event. These issues redefine the battleground. It is not on the battlefield that the supervillainy of Al Qaeda will be defeated. It is a war of values and belief systems. It is important to take note that these books are not championing the tenets of neoliberalism, deregulation, unchecked capitalism, and all of these other ills of modern America. Rather, they are referring to the American values represented by the superheroes.

Captain America's introduction in The Ultimates (Millar & Hitch, 2002–2003) best reflects this desire to return to classic values. Set in an alternate universe, almost the entire first issue is focused on Captain America

fighting in World War II. At the end of the issue, he averts a missile attack but is lost after it detonates. He is believed dead but is frozen in ice, and his body is preserved. In succeeding issues, he is found and revived in a post-9/11 world.

What we can take from this is that there is a focus on the Greatest Generation. The comic book connects the contemporary American narrative with that of the last generation when America was fighting on what was unarguably the side of right. Since WWII, America has been mired in various morally ambiguous military conflicts such as the Vietnam War, Iran Contra, American involvement in Afghanistan in the 1980s, and the first Gulf War. This book skips all of this, reinstating the overtly patriotic Captain America in the present so that he is unscathed by America's morally ambiguous past choices.

While *The Ultimates* recasts Captain America and attempts to highlight his being a symbol of moral right, the rest of the book treads darker territory and becomes a questioning of the military initiatives undertaken by the United States after 9/11.

We see in the earlier books that we were dealing with street level heroes and the sentiments of overcoming a great tragedy. Here, we get a portrayal of the United States once it takes upon itself the role of world peacekeeper, imposing its will on other countries. It justifies developing weapons and defense systems by saying that it is the only way to protect the country. It is telling that The Ultimates, a government-funded team of superpowered individuals, are referred to as Persons of Mass Destruction.

In *The Ultimates*, massive budgets are devoted to assembling a team who can fight off any kind of superpowered threat that might arise. There is no threat at the moment, but the past attack is used to fuel fears and funding for the project. Thor, portrayed here as a political activist, initially refuses membership to the group, sending his recruiters away by saying:

> Oh it matters not whether you are wearing capes or combat boots, little man. You are all just thugs in uniform who will smash any threat to a corrupt status quo. Go back to your paymasters and tell them that the Son of Odin is not interested in working for a military industrial complex who engineers *wars* and murders *innocents*. Your talk might be of supervillains now, but it is only a matter of time before you are sent to kill for *oil* or *free trade*.

Thor's tirade, while couched in a superhero monologue, is familiar in idea and expression. We have heard this before, we know of this stance, and we understand the distrust of the military industrial complex. It is only more pointed and entertaining when coming out of the thunder-god's mouth. While we might have become inured to the chants of political protest, the framing of this discourse in this form makes it novel and easier to engage.

The superhero becomes a mouthpiece of 9/11 rhetoric, and through the interactions between the characters, we are provided various perspectives. Thor is represented as a European liberal hippy. He addresses Nick Fury, a career soldier who represents America's interests, which are militaristic in nature. Fury is accompanied by Bruce Banner, a meek scientist who relies on the US military for funding. Science and technology are under the dictates of the military. It is the lefty militant who takes a stand.

Two events occur which lead to Thor's joining the Ultimates. First, the US president doubles the country's international aid budget. The second is that Thor and Iron Man, portrayed as a military profiteer, become friends because of a common interest in alcohol and women. One might question then if this reveals opportunities for collaboration or if it portrays the cooptation of dissent.

A larger irony reveals itself through the first story arc of The Ultimates. The public is constantly questioning the funding being devoted to the group. This funding is provided under the assumption that this group will protect the US against any supervillain level threats. It is regularly stated in the book that government funding for the organization is massive, allowing them to rent an island off of Manhattan as their base and to keep more than 20,000 personnel on staff. Part of this funding is channeled into black-ops missions. Even the public team, made up of the famous superheroes, is unaware of those black-ops missions.

The lead superhero team is not fighting any supervillains. In a fit of jealousy and rage over his girlfriend dating someone else and his constantly being embarrassed by other members of the team, Bruce Banner transforms himself into the Hulk and rampages through New York City. He attempts to justify his actions by saying that, by having the rest of the team fight the Hulk, the public will see how necessary the funding is. The threat that the Ultimates are supposed to fight winds up coming from their ranks. The Hulk murders thousands of innocents. But through PR work and a calculated cover-up, no one ever finds out that it was the Hulk. They get their funding with no questions asked.

This can be read as a cynical take on how the United States manufactures its own threats. Evidence has been found that implies Osama Bin Laden and many other terrorists around the world received training and support from the CIA and other American military groups. One might also connect this to the US's invasion of Iraq in 2003 because they had supposedly found weapons of mass destruction. Fabricated or misrepresented data would lead to funding that would enable even more war and destruction.

The Ultimates might be about a superhero team, but underneath the big action romps that made it appealing to readers is a critical look at America's militaristic response to 9/11.

The comics published right after 9/11 called for a moral response to the attacks. We see in The Ultimates and the next few books that we will examine military and policy responses that would lead to paranoia and distrust.

In *Secret War* (Bendis & Dell'Otto, 2004), Nick Fury, director of the global peacekeeping force S.H.I.E.L.D., presents information to the president that supervillains are being funded by a foreign backer, the Prime Minister of the fictional country of Latveria. As such, he argues, they are no longer criminals, but rather, they are terrorists being funded by the Latverian regime. He advocates that the president authorizes a decisive attack in retaliation to the terrorist attacks.

The event features a number of issues that are reflective of post-9/11 concerns. First among these is the question of torture. The information connecting the Prime Minister to the American supervillains receiving funding is obtained through torture. The question of the acceptability of torture as a method of intelligence gathering would be a major point of contention, especially as evidence of atrocities such as those committed at Abu Ghraib surfaced.

In the context of the superhero genre, we see characters regularly beating each other up and sometimes even killing each other. We are also accustomed to comedically intricate torture devices, like in James Bond movies. But the torture in the first issue of Secret War is portrayed with such viciousness and sadism that one is given pause. We are not accustomed to seeing this kind of realistic brutality, even in the context of a genre where many conflicts are resolved by violence.

The victim is already beaten and bloodied when we are brought to the scene. His interrogators loom over him. They smile and laugh as they beat him. He begs for them to stay away, but they grab hold of him, put him in an arm-bar,

and then smash him against a wall until he gives them the information they want. Through the writing and art, the comic book conveys the brutality of torture. It replaces the fantastically rendered fight sequences or goofy death traps with a stripped down, almost mundane interrogation room. It gathers force from the apparent hopelessness of the victim and the sadistic glee that the interrogators express. This could be read as an attempt to show that no one, not even a supervillain, deserves to be tortured.

The next issue that the comic book raises is that of the preemptive strike. The president denies Fury's request. In response, Fury decides to push through with the strike anyway. Making reference to 9/11, he says, "It's happening again! It's all happening again. They have the information, they *have* it! They know *who* and they—irrefutable evidence in their hands as to who their enemy is…and they are going to sit on it and do nothing." He assembles a team of superheroes without telling them what their mission is. And he launches a preemptive strike against the Latverian regime, targeting their Prime Minister.

This could be reflective of the United States' decisions to invade both Afghanistan and Iraq. Both operations were preemptive strikes targeting leading officials. Fury argues that he is only acting to protect the American people. He adds that the strike is their only choice because, "That's the language that they understand." He believes that there is no recourse but violence.

A year after the strike in the book's narrative present, the heroes who were involved are attacked in their homes. Then, New York City is subjected to a large scale supervillain attack. All of this is in retribution for the strike. It would not be difficult to find similarities between this and the terrorist attacks that have followed in both the United States and other parts of the world. Preemptive strikes were undertaken with the belief that they would prevent further attacks. But we are not sure if these actually prevented attacks or served as provocation for new attacks.

We can observe in this comic book a clear movement away from the black and white, clearly drawn lines between good and evil which we have come to expect from superhero stories. The questions raised in Secret War reflect serious questions about the United States' War on Terror.

If *Secret War* was critical of the military approach and foreign policy, Civil War was a gigantic event that would shift the focus to the question of what America is supposed to stand for.

Civil War (Millar, McNiven, & Vines, 2006–2007), published from 2006–2007, begins with a tragedy that echoes 9/11. A group of wannabe superheroes mishandles an encounter with a group of villains. It results in one of the villains detonating, killing all the heroes and villains in the encounter, as well as all people within his gigantic blast radius, which includes an elementary school. This prompts a backlash against superpowered individuals, and in response, the US Congress enacts the Superhuman Registration Act (SRA). The SRA divides the superhero community, as some willingly register, revealing their identities and taking a government salary.

Others refuse to register, most notably Captain America, who decides to fight the SRA, as he sees it as a curtailment of freedom.

Some characters suffer from revealing their identities. One of the reasons for the secret identity is to protect those close to you from possible retribution. Because Spider-Man reveals his identity, the mafia kills his Aunt May.

Beneath the convoluted story of *Civil War* is the basic question of how much of our civil liberties are we willing to sacrifice for security. *Civil War* sees the superheroes of the Marvel Universe divided along the lines of the SRA.

While the comic book creates a dividing line between the characters, it also shows the different moral positions of the characters. For example, Iron Man, who works with the US government on military projects, sides with the government. He has a public persona, and he stands to gain from a formalized system of registration and government funding. Reed Richards/Mr. Fantastic recognizes how wrong forcing registration might be morally, but he believes his work is in science not politics, so he accedes to government demands. Sue Richards/The Invisible Woman leaves her husband Reed and joins the resistance because it is what she believes is morally right. Spider-Man is one of the few street level characters to join the Pro-Registration side. Most of the street level characters operate as vigilantes and do not want their identities revealed. They fight villains because it is what they believe is right. They do not want a government paycheck for doing so. Spider-Man joins the Pro-Registration movement initially because he is an employee of Iron Man. Spider-Man has always been portrayed as having financial troubles, and his job working for Iron Man had afforded him a way out of those troubles. He rationalizes that, if the government and his boss have supported the Act, then it must be what the American people want.

It is a common trope in superhero comics for superheroes to get into fights with each other out of misunderstandings. But in no other book has the divide between them been based on principles and moral positions as they are in this one. Civil War can be read as a critique of The Patriot Act and Homeland Security, in the way that those too ask for citizens to give up their civil liberties for security.

Finally, we look at Marvel's *Secret Invasion* (Bendis, Yu, Morales, 2008), published in 2008. In the comic book, a space-shifting race of aliens called the Skrull invades Earth. What is notable about this is that the Skrull have sleeper agents already embedded among the superheroes on Earth. The story is simple compared with that of *Civil War*. The comic book focuses on the struggle to find out who is human and who is Skrull.

What we can focus on is the sense of paranoia that the book explores. This can easily be read as a reframing of the heightened tensions within America, with lines not only drawn by race and class, but also as the country was divided between Red and Blue states.

It is also interesting that part of the Skrull's invasion is religious. All their announcements to the public as they attempt to assimilate Earth into their empire are ended with the phrase, "He loves you so much." One could read this to be a commentary on the way that religion has permeated the discourse of public and political affairs.

The most poignant moment that explores issues of religion and belief comes from the character Hulkling, who is half Skrull. The dialogue can be read to represent a variety of backgrounds. Of course, one could immediately think of Muslim extremists, but then, this could be turned around and used to address Christian religious fundamentalists or even some of the methods practiced by the American military: "Even with what little I know about my heritage, I know this is not what the Skrull Empire stands for. This was extremism. This was terrorism."

A captured Skrull replies, "Tragedy has decimated our people. Our planets no longer exist. Our faith was our last chance." One could easily connect this statement to that of various extremists and terrorists, regardless of religion. It echoes powerfully in the extent of their defeat. As is expected in stories in the genre, the superheroes win, they repel the alien invasion, but scenes like this deny a sense of triumph.

Based on the comic books discussed, we can see that the superhero genre was utilized to examine contemporary issues. The filter of the

superhero genre allowed readers to approach key concerns, reframing them through the metaphors and conventions of the superhero. This helped to make the issues clearer and helped to make a space for critical discussion of the important ideas and values.

If one were to engage the questions in these books, like preemptive strikes, the curtailment of civil liberties, or religious extremism, directly, the debates would quickly be heated and would most likely be left unresolved. The filter of superhero comics creates aesthetic distance from which we can approach these issues.

FILIPINO SUPERHERO FILMS SINCE 2000

Filipino comics do not have a similar tradition of mainstream superhero comics dominating the market. While we do have comic heroes, attempts to bring them back to mainstream publishing in the early 2000s, with new interpretations of Darna and Lastikman, did not lead to ongoing series. Independent comic creators continue to explore the possibilities of the genre, but they do not have the large scale reach to make them comparable with American superhero comics.

However, we find the superhero genre being utilized in the medium of film. Emil Flores (2005) notes that the glut of Filipino superhero films was most likely because of the popularity of Hollywood superhero films (p. 24).

Beginning in 2000 with Bryan Singer's *X-Men* and, as of this writing, peaking with Joss Whedon's *Avengers* which stands as one of the highest grossing films having broken the billion-dollar mark, American superhero films continue to occupy prime space in Hollywood release calendars as tent pole films. Moulton (2012) connects the events of 9/11 to the rise of the superhero in American mainstream culture. Because of the traumatic event, the audience was looking for heroes that would figuratively represent them and their world. This has led to superhero movies, TV shows, the revival of the comic book industry after its bust in the 1990s, and even an attempted Broadway musical based on Spider-Man (p. 5).

As a result of successful Hollywood superhero films in the early 2000s, mainstream Filipino film attempted to adapt the genre for local viewers. These films were targeted at a popular audience, as evidenced by their mostly being released during the Metro Manila Film Festival. Filipino superhero movies of the time period appropriate the iconography and imagery of the mainstream

American superhero genre while incorporating supposedly Filipino beliefs and the loose formula of the family-oriented action–comedy blockbuster MMFF film.

The films that this paper will examine are *Captain Barbell* (2004), *Fantastic Man* (2003), *Gagamboy* (2004), *Lastikman* (2003), *Super Inday and the Golden Bibe* (2010), *Super Noypi* (2002), and *Wapakman* (2010).

This paper's contention is that, while these films fall within the formula and traditions of Filipino mainstream filmmaking, their appropriation of the superhero as a character is limited to iconography. These films do not use the superhero genre to struggle with concepts of power and responsibility or to engage with contemporary concerns.

It is important to take note that the different traditions between the American comics and Filipino films necessitate very different discussions. The American comics discussed in the previous section are built upon decades of history. The characters are part of a universe that readers are already familiar with. Thus, putting a character in a specific situation can create more meaning because of the familiarity that the readers have with the character. This could be seen in the earlier discussions of Spider-Man at the site of the fallen towers or when Captain America was introduced to a post-9/11 world.

The Filipino films of the 2000s do not have the same luxury of history to build upon. They were all introducing new characters. Even the films with characters that had appeared before, Captain Barbell, Lastikman, and Super Inday and the Golden Bibe, were all reboots. As a result, all of these movies provide origin stories for their characters. It is from the perspective of the origin story that we will assess these films. We will ask, what do these superhero origin stories reveal about the way that Filipinos think about superheroes? We can also gather the underlying themes that the films express through a critical reading of their appropriation of the superhero.

What is most noticeable is that these films remove the important themes of the superhero genre: human agency and choice towards overcoming great odds or overwhelming foes. Instead, they feature superheroes who wind up as oppressors of the oppressed.

In Peter Coogan's (n.d.) definition of the superhero, he states three important characteristics: Mission, Powers, and Identity (ch. 1). While the Filipino superhero movies feature powers and identity, the mission aspect is missing. This paper argues that the mission is the crucial element that makes the superhero a superhero.

As an example of the Marvel superhero origin story, we can look at Amazing Fantasy #15 (Lee & Ditko, 2012) which features the first appearance of Spider-Man. He is bitten by a radioactive spider during a school field trip, bestowing upon him spider-like powers. Having grown up without much money, he uses his powers to make money by joining a wrestling bout and making a TV appearance. He watches a thief escape, and this thief winds up killing his Uncle Ben. After he captures the thief and realizes that he could have prevented Uncle Ben's murder, he comes to the conclusion that "With great power there must also come—great responsibility!"

This exhibits the power and responsibility aspect of the superhero's prosocial mission, if rather pointedly. The superhero gets a power and chooses to use it for good. From that first appearance, the central themes of Spider-Man stories have revolved around the "exploration of the relationships of power and the obligation to use it correctly" (Wolk, 2007, ch. 4).

When we examine the Filipino superheroes in the films Captain Barbell, Lastikman, Super Inday and the Golden Bibe, and Super Noypi, we find that these films remove the decision to become a superhero from their characters. What leads them to becoming "superheroes" is a deity assigning them powers. Fantastic Man does not acknowledge a god as overtly but still acknowledges fate having a hand in assigning the powers. On the other hand, while Wapakman and Gagamboy do not have a supernatural force leading the characters, they have comic books dictating to the characters.

We can look at each of the films and identify how they address the character's choice in becoming a superhero or lack thereof. We can observe that these films will follow the convention identified by Emil Flores (2005). He states that Filipino superheroes are chosen, based on their purity or piety (p. 28). With the exception of the characters in Super Noypi, the characters come from the lower class of society and can be thought of as belonging to the oppressed or api.

The most glaring example of this would be Inday of Super Inday and the Golden Bibe. She is a poor country lass whose adoptive mother dies. As she journeys to find her real mother in the city, she takes work as household help, serving as a nanny. While there, she is oppressed by the household help who has been there longer. She puts up with all kinds of abuse, particularly from a fallen angel and tiyanak who are searching for

someone to bestow powers upon. They put forward their criteria for being a superhero:

1. Magandang kalooban.
2. Matapang at handang isugal ang buhay para sa kapwa at handing magsakripisyo para sa iba.
3. Walang galit ang puso. Handang magpatawad sa mga nagkasala sa kanya.
4. Kailangan tanggapin niya ng buong puso ang pagiging superhero.

We can take note that most important is "magandang loob." This we will see is defined as willing to tolerate rude behavior. In a series of scenes that follow Super Inday's journey to the city, the fallen angel and the tiyanak do things like trip her, accuse her of stealing, and insult her in a number of ways. She bears it all, and based on this, they come to the conclusion that she has "magandang loob." Then, they begin to follow her around.

The rest of the film has Inday being followed around by these two as she deals with the mundane work of being household help and fights off monsters. When she fulfills all of the requirements, she is bestowed powers which she can use to fight the enemy.

The fourth requirement, of accepting the role of superhero, is interesting in that it implies choice. But then, the entire narrative has pushed the character to a point where she has no choice but accept. She has been placed in dangerous situations and will not have survived without the powers that were being bestowed. After her charges are kidnapped, she is told of her destiny, and she accepts the powers so that she can rescue them.

We take note here that these powers are given by the fallen angel. These powers come from god, and it is implied that she may only use them for good. While it might seem that she has a choice in accepting superhero powers, it is clear that she has no choice in how to use them because of their divine origins. The fallen angel's return to heaven and the tiyanak's entry into heaven hinge on her decision to be a superhero as well. The forces driving her decisions are external more than internal.

Another character whose powers come directly from god is Lastikman. It is interesting that this film employs the conventions of origins similar to Marvel comics. He is a nerdy kid who is bullied in school. Lastikman's

father is an astronomer who dies when the boy is young. His mother is an environmental activist who dies during a protest. He goes walking in the forest, and a meteor crashes. It hits a rubber tree and the debris hits him, giving him stretching powers.

Then, the film leaves these traditional superhero conventions and introduces god as the force influencing the meteor crash. Lastikman's father's ghost appears to him in a dream the night after the accident. The father says, "Matagal kong ipinakiusap kay lord na sana'y matupad sa'yo ang pangarap ko at teorya. Kita mo naman pinagbigyan tayo. Kailangan nga lang gamitin mo yang kapangyarihan mo sa kabutihan. Wag mong gagamitin sa kasamaan at kapilyohan dahil kung hindi babawiin yan ni lord. Sige ka."

Captain Barbell does not attribute its character's powers to god. Instead, it points to a sentient nature. A stone falls from space and is buried in the ground. It stays in the ground, but when the world needs saving, nature causes it to surface in the form of a barbell. And nature finds a way for the barbell to be found by the right person. This chosen person should have "tibay ng dibdib" which we might think is courage, but I think also refers again to the sense of "loob" similar to Super Inday.

In this case, the human persona, Enteng, is a poor older brother who works as a janitor at a gym. He is bullied by people and put down regularly. Still, he works hard, struggles, tries to make ends meet, and takes care of his siblings. He finds the barbell after he is bullied by people at the gym.

When the Captain Barbell persona speaks to Enteng, he puts forward some rules. Captain Barbell is meant to defend the oppressed and fight for justice. And the barbell is never to be used for evil. The poor person who is api is the person most deserving of powers.

Fantastic Man is interesting in that it features a character actively looking to get powers and become a superhero. Prof. James is a nutty professor who wants powers, but it is his assistant Fredo who gets the powers from an archeological site of apparently alien origin. Here, the character is chosen, as an orb meant to represent the powers goes into him and not his boss.

After they realize the extent of Fredo's powers, these two characters sit and think. At first, Prof. James wants the powers transferred to him. Then, the two characters come to the conclusion that there must have been some bigger reason that Fredo was chosen. Fredo, before acquiring powers, is shown as bumbling and an everyman. They surmise it is this that qualifies

him to become a superhero. Of course once he has powers, Prof. James makes it clear that Fredo has no choice but to be a superhero.

When we look at the characters of Super Noypi, we can see that they do not have any choice in acting as heroes. The movie kicks off with a character from the future telling them that, if they do not act, then a tyrant will take over and control the country. We take note here that, among these films, it is only Super Noypi that features characters from the upper economic classes.

We can compare Super Noypi with The Runaways, a post-9/11 Marvel Comics series that features a similar central idea. Both works are about teenaged characters who are the children of superpowered individuals. In both cases, the teenaged children inherit their parents' powers.

The crucial difference between the two sets of characters is the parents. The Runaways find out that their parents are actually a group of supervillains. They make the decision to run away from their parents and to do good deeds and right wrongs to make up for what their parents have done.

The characters of Super Noypi are the children of heroes, and they are asked to take up the roles that their parents used to play. As is explored in a number of the character conflicts, the film deals with these characters coming to terms with who their parents were and doing what their parents want them to. For example, one of the main characters, Ynigo, is a jock who does not want to study. His father is a politician who wants him to focus on school, insisting that Ynigo has a legacy he must inherit. It is revealed that his parents are aswang, and so he is one too. He embraces both his aswang powers and the pressure that his parents had placed on him.

The characters of Gagamboy and Wapakman are not chosen in the way that the other characters are. They are also poor and bullied. They work as an ice cream vendor and a plumber, respectively. What is interesting is that, even though both of these are new characters, both films show their characters sitting down and reading comics about Gagamboy and Wapakman, so they decide to copy the comics.

There is more of an element of choice with these characters, but it seems that, with their knowledge of the comics, they seem to have no choice but to fulfill what they have read. It is interesting that these are original characters that had no comics or movies before the film. The comics that they find of themselves are clearly plot devices to move the characters towards the decision of becoming a superhero.

The superhero's choice to do good is such an important element of the

superhero narrative. One of its functions is to make the superhero relatable. It puts power in the hands of the reader by saying that they have a choice. Readers are free to speculate what they would do if they had powers, and their exploration of the idea leads them to wanting to make the same choice as the heroes they read about. The element of choice communicates to the reader that, given the right circumstances and the right choices, he too would be a superhero.

Removing the element of choice means that not everyone can be a superhero. The way in which superpowers are earned glorifies the narrative of poverty in these films. It is the poor, the downcast, the meek, the weak, the bullied, the oppressed, and the api who god will reward with superpowers. And they must use them for good. What is interesting too, with these films, is how good and justice are defined.

We can understand a lot about a superhero by the kinds of villains that he fights. The Fantastic Four are always fighting Doctor Doom, an aristocratic dictator. Superman's villain is Lex Luthor, a capitalist-industrialist who does not care about people and is driven by hubris and vanity. Spider-Man's great nemesis Green Goblin is a rich scientist who conducted and profited from unethical experiments. The great supervillains are oppressors, usually richer and more powerful than the superheroes who face them.

Considering that the Filipino superheroes we have discussed so far have decided to do good and fight for justice, the kinds of enemies that they have are interesting. Though their enemies all perpetrate evil deeds, their social backgrounds and proximity to the heroes show that the Filipino superhero might actually be an instrument of oppression himself. We will once again examine each film.

Super Inday's enemy is the witch Ingrid, who is the fiancée of Inday's boss. We find out that Inday's boss also happens to be her father.

Ingrid is from the province and the lower classes. She climbs the social ladder using demonic powers, placing herself in a position where she can transcend those circumstances and take financial power. Inday earns her position in the social hierarchy by striking down the social climber, saving her father from Ingrid.

We see the most pronounced class conflict in Super Noypi. As mentioned earlier, the superhero team members are from the upper classes. They wind up fighting and killing Diego, who was the mechanic for their parents. Their parents killed his wife many years previous and took Diego's

child, raising her as their own. Diego's vengeance marks him as a textbook supervillain, but his relationship to the superhero children and their parents makes for an uncomfortable subtext. The employee who sees the unfair position of his employers and attempts to rise up against them is imprisoned and ultimately killed.

Gagamboy's nemesis was his former coworker. The two are shown in the opening scene competing to sell ice cream. Both characters are poor, but where Gagamboy is fortunate to swallow a magic spider that bestows spider powers but does not change his physical appearance, his nemesis swallows a cockroach, changing him so that he looks like one. He goes by the moniker Ipisman.

Gagamboy has few scenes outside of its main setting, a squatters' area. All the characters are stuck in poverty. Ipisman's background is made all the more tragic as we are shown scenes of him receiving letters from his poor parents asking him for more money. Where Gagamboy's issues are courting the pretty girl and his scenes are always played with lightness, we can find more tragedy in his enemy. We see here, though, two characters stuck in the same kind of poverty, fighting against each other. Along with Ipisman, every other character that Gagamboy fights is from the same poverty-stricken area.

Lastikman's enemy is his former student. Stryker starts out as a student who is bullied but who tries to do good because he idolizes Lastikman. One of his bullies dresses up like Lastikman, and the group beats and maims Stryker. He is driven mad at the thought of his favorite superhero betraying him, so he becomes a supervillain.

The class divide here is reversed, because Stryker is from the upper class—which allows him to afford the gear for his supervillainy—but we see a power divide because of Lastikman's having been his teacher. After a murderous rampage, Stryker realizes that he has gone too far, and he winds up getting himself electrocuted.

One cannot help but feel that there is no justice in this character's death. All the character does through two acts is play sidekick and fanboy, and then after being beaten and handicapped, he goes insane and becomes a supervillain. In his final moments, he realizes that he has been misled. This makes for a compelling character, but it also makes Lastikman lame and puts into question why he would be fighting such a poor and oppressed character.

Fantastic Man fights what is supposed to be an alien. But for the most part, that alien occupies the body of his librarian-girlfriend Helen. In the same sequence where Fantastic Man gets his power, the alien inhabits Helen. She

spends most of the film in the hospital, until she rises with a fetish for skimpy clothing and an undirected need to commit violence.

After a few scenes fighting the alien in Helen's body, the alien takes its own form and fights Fantastic Man. Still, it is worth noting that he has to fight someone in close proximity to him and someone who is from a similar social class.

Wapakman and Captain Barbell are interesting because that which gives them powers also gives powers to their enemies.

Wapakman gets his powers from exposure to a magical scientific formula. When the container of the formula explodes, two other characters are exposed. In an earlier scene, he was embarrassed at his children's Parents Day event by a firefighter and his kids' teacher. Both the firefighter and the teacher become villains for him to fight.

The fireman gets caught in a fire. Wapakman manages to save other people, but the fireman turns into a molten man. Wapakman fights and captures him. The teacher catches her boyfriend with another woman. She screams and that kills the cheating couple. Wapakman fights and captures her, too.

The circumstances that turn them "evil" do not seem unsympathetic, and that brings into question what the creators of these films consider is the dividing line between what makes one good or evil. It is quite possible that this all goes back to "loob" and one's "dibdib" and not other external factors that shape a character; which means that if one receives powers, one is either meant to be good or evil.

Where this becomes even more problematic is when we look at the villains that Captain Barbell faces. The same magic space rock that gives Captain Barbell his powers also gives villains powers. One could question at this point why nature can take the time to make sure that only a worthy person finds the barbell, but random people can run into other fragments of the space rock.

There are three main villains in Captain Barbell. The big boss, through some convoluted storytelling, happens to also be Enteng's long lost father. He is a fire-breather at a circus. He has trouble making ends meet, and he goes on a rampage after his boss refuses to give him a little more money.

Fighting someone who is poor and oppressed has been common among most of the heroes. But a reading of Captain Barbell's minor villains reveals something more disturbing.

The first villain, Dagampat, is a taong grasa. He saves a child from being hit by a car. When people see him carrying the child, they assume that he is

trying to kidnap the kid. They proceed to throw things at him and beat him. Beaten to near the point of death, he lies down to die among rats, where it also happens that the magic rock has landed. He becomes rat-faced and goes on a murderous rampage. Captain Barbell shows up and kills him.

The next villain is Freezy. First, she is shown being harassed by her boss. She fends off unwanted advances. Then she is raped, frozen in a block of ice, and dumped in the river. She is revived by a magic rock, and she returns to exact her vengeance on men who are "masyadong mainit." Captain Barbell smiles while he twists her wrists and freezes her into submission.

What we can gather from the portrayals of villains is that almost all of them are just as oppressed and api as the heroes, if not more so. The decision to become a villain is often made out of desperation. It seems that the characters have no other choice than to be the villain.

We can observe then that, in both the creation of heroes and villains, Filipino superhero movies deprive their characters of choice. They rarely, if ever, have the freedom to do anything other than what has been dictated or chosen.

Considering that the adaptations made are telling of culture and thinking, then we can observe that these films advocate the maintenance of the status quo. They pit the oppressed and poor against each other. For characters meant to fight for justice, it is the immediate threats, often very similar to the heroes themselves, that they fight.

What gives these characters the moral righteousness to beat up their enemies is that they are chosen. It is what they are meant to do. This is a frightening mentality if we consider this a metaphor for how these films are telling us to think about justice and fighting for good. In conversations with Emil Flores (2005), the idea has emerged that this is indicative of folk Catholic belief. It is the belief in "tiis" and in "ang diyos na ang bahala" where being meek and kind-hearted will have their own rewards. In effect, they are telling us that it is only those who are appointed by a higher power, those who are chosen, that have a right to fight for justice. This goes against the assertion of the traditional superhero narrative that we can all be heroes.

It is clear then that while the superhero genre at its best puts power and control in the hands of its readers or viewers, Filipino superhero films since 2000 subvert this. They remove choice and free will from their

viewers, advocating meekness and waiting for powers to be handed to you because of your kind-heartedness.

CONCLUSION

In comparing the ways that the superhero genre has been employed to tell stories in two different cultures, we have come to see both opportunities for creators to put control in the hands of their audience or to wrest that control from them. We see that while there might be a homogenous view of the superhero as being about spandex, capes, and outlandish adventure stories for kids that there are many ways to read superhero stories.

It has been interesting to take note of the drastic difference in the way that the two sample groups of texts are willing to engage contemporary issues and concerns. The Marvel Comics have all but named the actual political issues. The thinly veiled discourse has been fertile ground for exploring pressing issues. Filipino superhero movies on the other hand have been decidedly situated in the realm of fantasy, telling origin stories that support the api narrative that one might find in telenovelas and mainstream movies.

It is worth questioning whether we should expect Filipino superhero movies to be different. If all that these films are meant to do is entertain or if all they are doing is reflecting our culture and beliefs, then we might say that they have done what is expected of them. Most of these films did respectably in terms of ticket sales. And though this researcher might disagree with the api narrative, it is one that resonates throughout Philippine culture.

However, because of the decision to utilize the superhero genre, the filmmakers have taken a genre that allows for more than mere entertainment. The superhero genre is a rich space for discussing great ideas in big, explosive metaphors.

Based on what has been presented here, a number of future studies can be undertaken. One would be tracing back to the earliest Filipino superhero films to find if this lack of choice is part of the tradition or if it entered at a specific point in history. Another would be to examine the development of the Filipino superhero in other media, such as television and komiks. Tracing that development from the point when Filipino creators started creating superheroes would also reveal much about how

superheroes have been represented in our culture. Tracking Filipino superhero developments against American superheroes would also be a fruitful study, because of Filipino presence in both komiks and mainstream American comics.

While this paper comes to some conclusions about American and Filipino superheroes since 9/11, it hopefully leads to much more study and discourse in the field of superhero studies.

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