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Reconsidering the Colonialist and Imperialist Themes of Donald Duck Comics by Carl Barks and Don Rosa

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Abstract

Donald Duck comics has been a popular part of Indonesian children's media across its 44 year run which ended in 2020. However, the comic has been subjected to criticism for its depiction of race and colonialism, particularly in the popular works of Carl Barks, which often featured adventure stories set in distant, exotic locations and interaction with native people. This paper reexamined the Donald Duck comics by Carl Barks for its themes of colonialism and imperialism. It also looks at the works of Don Rosa, who often write continuation of Barks's works for similar themes. This study found that while he often featured ethnic stereotypes in his works, Barks's portrayal of Western colonialism and imperialism was often ambivalent, reflecting a pessimistic attitude towards Western modernity. This study also found that Rosa did not portray racial caricature like Barks did. He also did both works that did not challenge the assumptions of colonialism and imperialism as well as works that challenged such assumptions. This shows that the portrayal of colonialism and imperialism in Donald Duck comics is complicated and differs between authors and even within authors.

Keyword: Colonialism; Donald Duck; Imperialism

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INTRODUCTION

In June 2020, *Album Donal Bebek*, the Indonesian edition of Donald Duck comics, announced that after 44 years, it will cease publication after its final edition on June 29th, 2020 (Agnes, 2020). The news was met with much sadness from fans of the comics, many who have grown up reading them. The comic series depict the adventures of Donald Duck (Donal Bebek in Indonesian), an anthropomorphic duck, and his family and friends, notably his rich uncle Scrooge McDuck (Gober Bebek) and his nephews Huey, Dewey, and Louie (Kwik, Kwek, and Kwak). Donald Duck comics, while bearing the Disney name on the covers and the comics themselves, were drawn by various artists throughout its run. Most notable among them were Carl Barks and Don Rosa. Both artists often draw adventure stories which took place in distant, exotic locations, often involving the ducks looking for lost treasures or encountering lost civilizations.

Throughout its worldwide publication, the Donald Duck comics had been met with criticism, especially towards its themes of colonialism and imperialism. The most notable is Dorfman and Mattelart's How to Read Donald Duck (1971), which argued that the comics were propaganda for American capitalism and imperialism. However, Dorfman and Mattelart's work was also met with counter criticism. Andrae (2006), argued that, due to the limitation of their research, Dorfman and Mattelart failed to recognise the differences between the original script and the translation, which changed the dialogue into something more conservative than the original, as well as Barks's unique status as a Disney artist and the unique freedom he was afforded. Andrae also noted that Dorfman and Mattelart used a rather simplistic and reductive theory that "assumes that audiences are merely passive recipients of media content and do not alter or resist its messages" (p. 15). David Kunzle, the original English translator of How to Read Donald Duck, found that Barks's works had elements of satire and social realism which cannot be found in other Disney products or even other comics (Andrae, 2006, p. 13). Jenkins (2023) is another of Dorfman and Mattelart's critics who scrutinize their simplistic approach that treated Disney as a monolith and the audience as passive recipients with no agency of their own. However, despite the criticism,

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How to Read Donald Duck remained one of the most well known and influential critical works of Disney comics. As Bryan noted, "The scholarly approach to Donald Duck comics tended to be somewhat monolithic" (p. 7). Indeed, the scholarly works on Disney tend to emphasize its status as a corporate empire that produces works of popular/low culture, and the comics have often been overlooked as subject of studies. This paper is a reexamination of the colonialist and imperialist themes of Donald Duck comics by Carl Barks and Don Rosa by analyzing the differences in the approach of both artists.

METHOD

This is a qualitative study on Donald Duck comics by Carl Barks and Don Rosa. The data for this study are gathered from various issues of Donal Bebek, published in Indonesia, particularly from issue 1, 3 and 9 of the Komik Terbaik Disney Karya Carl Barks (Best Disney Comics by Carl Barks) series and issue 1, 2 and 4 of the Komik Petualangan Paman Gober Karya Don Rosa (Uncle Scrooge Adventure Comics by Don Rosa) series, with additional data gathered from issue 6 of the Kisah Hidup Paman Gober (The Life and Times of Scrooge McDuck) series and three issues of the *Album Donal Bebek* magazine, issue 1579, 1590, and 1624 which feature comics by Carl Barks. There are a total of 12 stories, 7 by Barks and 5 by Rosa, which were published in Indonesia from 2010 to 2012 that are used as data for this paper.

The data is analyzed for its portrayal of colonialism and imperialism. First, this paper discusses the portrayal of colonialism in the works of Carl Barks. These portrayals are often associated with stereotypical portrayals of non-white characters from the Global South which are featured in stories depicting adventures in exotic locations. Hall (1997) discussed how these stereotypes came from binary oppositions which crudely defined things as belonging in extremes, in this case civilization/savagery. Hall defined the process of stereotyping as "reduced to a few essentials, fixed in Nature by a few, simplified, characteristics" (p. 249). This study reexamines these claims about Barks's Donald Duck comics. Second, this study analyzes Don Rosa's works. Rosa, as a Disney comic artist who started out as a fan of Barks's works, had written works that are continuation of Barks's stories, such as "Return to Plain Awful," which is a sequel to "Lost in Andes," "Return to Xanadu," which is a sequel to both "Tralla La" and "The Lost Crown of Genghis Khan," and "The Lost Chart of Columbus," which is discussed below, a sequel to "The Golden Helmet." Rosa, like Barks, had written a lot of treasure hunt stories, often in distant, exotic settings, as all the sequel stories listed above and the original stories which they were based on feature the ducks travelling to distant locations or looking for some kind of lost treasures. However, Rosa was also writing for a different time than Barks, where the racist depictions that often feature in Barks's works were no longer deemed acceptable, leading to different approaches in his works. The literature on Rosa's works compared to Barks is lacking.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Background

The depiction of colonialism and imperialism in Disney comics has been a subject of debate. Dorfman and Mattelart had argued that Donald Duck comics were tools of indoctrination for American capitalism and imperialism, while other critics had noted that, regarding Barks, the attitude towards American imperialism is a lot less clear cut than Dorfman and Mattelart made it to be. In particular, David Kunzle had noticed that Barks's works tend to be more ambivalent towards imperialist ideologies. He found that "these were not simple stories of a Western imperialist who brings technology to "civilize" the "savages," but rather creates a more nuanced view of the problems of technology and modernization" (Bryan, 2021, p. 9). Similarly, Immerwahr (2020) had found that Barks's works expressed skepticism towards the modernizing influences of the US on the Global South. Ostrowski (2021) had read in Barks's works both criticism of modernization and US foreign policies as well as awareness towards dependency theory, as demonstrated in "City of Golden Roofs". Ostrowski also noted Barks's usage of racial caricature in his works. Analysis on the themes of colonialism and imperialism tend to focus on Barks's works and rarely take Rosa's works or any other Donald Duck comic artist that came after Barks, even if there are considerable works on Rosa as a successor of Barks.

Immerwahr (2020) also noted that Barks's depiction of imperialism is noted to be masked. The ducks were not violent conquerors or plunderers, but rather at the receiving end of violence by the inhabitants of Global South who often stand "more than twice as tall as the diminutive ducks" (p. 100). The ducks also often

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showered in riches by "indifferent owners of wealth" who "seem clueless about its value" (p. 12). Yet this depiction also comes with, according to Immerwahr, a skepticism towards modernization and U.S. intervention politics. Donald and his family often left the primitive society worse off with the technological innovation they carried with them.

Figure 1. Original uncensored panels from "Voodoo Hoodoo" depicting ethnic stereotypes

Figure 2. The panels in the Indonesian edition

The depiction of racial stereotypes in Barks's works, such as those found in "Voodoo Hoodoo" and "Darkest Africa" which are discussed below, tend to be censored in later publishings, removing the more stereotypical physical features of the characters. For example, in the Indonesian version of "Voodoo Hoodoo," the lips of the African characters were colored with the same tone as their skin, unlike in the original version.

Rosa, who was active from 1987 to 2005, wrote for a different time than Barks. It was a time after the Civil Rights era in the United States and the decolonization of the Third World, that saw the collapse of colonial rule across Asia, Africa, and other territories (Kennedy, 2016). Rosa was writing for a time where, according to Gray (2024), "the political and social landscape of America was changing and rights for marginalized groups were increasing; attitudes toward people of the Global Majority were improving and the original images used by Barks in the 1940s were no longer acceptable" (pp. 126-127). Rosa, in his depictions of the characters from "Voodoo Hoodoo" in his own *The Life and Times of Scrooge McDuck*, toned down the racial stereotyping. However, the redesigns did not do enough to remove the stereotypical elements of their characters, and, in 2023, Disney took the decision to ban two stories by Rosa which featured Bombie (Ducktalks, 2023).

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Carl Barks

Perhaps the best known Disney comic artist is Carl Barks, who was active in 1942 to 1966. Even though his name, like many others who worked on Disney comics, was not listed on the comics he had written to keep "the illusion that Walt Disney was responsible not only for the animated cartoons that bore his name but also for the myriad of children's books and comics that carried the Disney logo" (Andrae, 2006, p. 4), readers were quick to notice the quality of his works and called him "the good artist". It was only in 1960, when a fan "used a ruse" to uncover his identity that Barks's name was known to readers for the first time. Barks was a prolific artist, with over 700 stories credited to him.

Barks was notable for writing many memorable stories and creating a colorful cast of supporting characters for Donald Duck. The most popular one is Scrooge McDuck, Donald's wealthy uncle who was so popular among readers that he became a fixture of Barks's stories, even becoming a main character in his own right (Andrae, 2006). These stories featuring Scrooge often involve treasure hunts in exotic, distant locations. Barks was also known to indulge in "invidious ethnic stereotypes" even before his employment by Disney. This usage of ethnic stereotypes continued in the Disney comics he had written, seemingly going hand-in-hand with the colonialist images of the Global South that he employed in his stories. Although Barks, according to Immerwahr (2020), managed to create detailed, authentic depictions of distant places thanks to his usage of references from his extensive collection of National Geographic magazine, he still portrayed his traditional societies as "savages," full of "some of the most discomfiting colonialist stereotypes: childlike natives, noble savages, African cannibals, lazy Pacific islanders, and deceitful Arabs" (p. 15).

The most infamous example of this is in "Voodoo Hoodoo" (2010). First published in 1949, in this story Barks portrayed African people as backwards, superstitious, and even violent and scary people, and drew them based on the ethnic stereotypes which Hall (1997) described, such as "thick lips, fuzzy hair, broad face and nose, and so on" (p. 249). Hall saw these stereotypes of African people as being popularized by both the European colonial expansion to Africa, which produced the popular image of "The progress of the great white explorer-adventurers and the encounters with the black African exotic" (p. 240) and the challenging of slavery by the Abolitionists in the USA. Another colonialist stereotypical depiction of Africa can be found in "Darkest Africa." It was originally published in 1948 and published in Indonesia in 2012 as "Afrika Gelap." Unlike "Voodoo Hoodoo," this story was published fully uncensored in Indonesia. It depicted the same racial stereotypes of the fearsome, savage natives, with the same stereotypical physical features.

The depiction of colonialist stereotypes and the destruction by modernity to traditional societies is demonstrated in "Land of the Totem Poles". Originally published in 1949 and published in Indonesian in 2012 as "Negeri Tiang Totem", it depicts Donald and his nephews in a salesman competition in the rural northern part of Canada. They encountered an indigenous settlement, and attempted to persuade the people to buy their goods. However, their attempts only ended in chaos as Donald, who tried to sell cosmetics to the indigenous people, was tried for poisoning the people. In reality, they had seemed to have mistaken Donald's cosmetics as many different things, such as perfume for mouthwash or hair removal cream for hair dye. In return, the nephews tried to save Donald with the steam organ they were supposed to sell, with totem poles as the whistles, thus tricking the indigenous people into thinking the totem poles had been angered. Here Barks have depicted the indigenous people as both naive and violent, especially towards the ducks, and the potential destructive power modernity has towards primitive, traditional societies.

Another example is in "City of Golden Roofs," originally published in 1957 and published in Indonesia in 2010. It has a similar plot with "Land of the Totem Poles" with Donald once again going on a salesmanship competition, this time with his uncle Scrooge, in Southeast Asia. Donald, with his tiny record player, saw success, while Scrooge, with his giant stove, struggled, until they encountered the lost city of Tangkor Wat, with its gold-covered roofs. Donald's record players quickly attracted attention, and caused the denizens of the city to abandon their duty and trade their jewellries for the novel machine. This event annoyed the king so much, and Scrooge took this opportunity to use his stove to increase the heat inside the city and made it too hot to dance. Scrooge then tricked the king into paying him with a barrel filled with the melted golden roof, winning the competition. While it did not employ the naive, childlike natives as much as "Land of the Totem Poles" did, it portrayed Barks's feelings towards modernization quite well. The ducks are not a civilizing influence towards the traditional, non-Western cultures they encountered. They are harbingers of doom and destruction. Yet another

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example that illustrated this is in "Island in the Sky" (2010), originally published in 1960. In it, the ducks traveled to outer space to find another place to store Scrooge's wealth, and encountered a desolate asteroid populated by tiny creatures similar to the stereotypical depiction of Indigenous Americans. Donald scared away their only source of food, the white birds who were the other inhabitants of the asteroid by firing a gun, and caused a problem between them and the asteroid people. Eventually, they solved the problem by connecting the asteroid with another, fertile one which is full of food and water. Here, the ducks' very presence, and Donald's violent streak, caused a problem for the childlike native inhabitants of a far away place.

Figure 3. The asteroid inhabitants bowing to the ducks in "Island in the Sky"

Immerwahr had listed "Treasure of Marco Polo" (published in Indonesian as "Harta Karun Marco Polo" in 2012) as another example of Barks's rejection of modernity, as the story, set in a Southeast Asian country aptly named "Unsteadystan," ended with the soldiers of the revolution turning against their rebel leader, declaring that they want to return to monarchy. But the story, published very late in Barks's career in 1966, is notable for another reason than an endorsement for monarchy. In the end, Scrooge, after getting entangled with the failed revolution attempt and saved by the prince of Unsteadystan, also aptly named Prince Char Ming, gave the treasure to the people of Unsteadystan as he had lost any desire for treasures and the hungry people could make a better use of it. This story, which predates Dorfman and Mattelart's *How to Read Donald Duck*, shows that even in Barks's time, there had been subversions of the treasure hunt stories that recognize the imperialist implication of such narrative.

Another point of contention in Immerwahr's analysis of Barks is, when listing stories of foolish foreigners who do not understand the value of the wealth they hold, he listed a story of "A Venusian trades Scrooge a moon made entirely of gold for a box of dirt" (p. 12). But upon further scrutiny, this analysis fell apart. This story, "The Twenty-four Carat Moon" (2010), ended with the Venusian turning said box of dirt into a whole planet with a planet-making machine, complete with its own ecosystem with his favorite food, skunk cabbage. This Venusian had been stranded in the titular golden moon for almost eight centuries, with nothing to eat and drink and not getting any older, and he wanted nothing more than to have anything to eat. In the end, He left Scrooge and the nephews with his own planet, with food and water and life, while the ducks were left with nothing but a desolate moon with only gold with it. Far from a story about "Fair-dealing, clever ducks encounter stupid and occasionally violent foreigners who do not value the treasures they possess" (Immerwahr, 2020, p. 12), this is a story that explores the arbitrary value placed on luxury objects. Gold is only valuable within the society that places value in it. Without, it is only worthless yellow rocks, especially compared to food and water, which fulfill the primary needs. In the end, Scrooge reshaped the crown on his statue that he made shortly after landing into a dunce cap, further hammering home the message of the story.

Don Rosa

Don Rosa occupied a special place in the modern Disney comics. He started out as a fan of Barks's Scrooge comics and his works often built upon the foundations laid out by Barks. He is known for his "attention to detail, in-depth historical research, and love of both Barks and characters" (Bryan, 2021, pp. 6-7) which is shown in his best known work, the multi-chapter series *The Life and Times of Scrooge McDuck*. Rosa, who wrote for a different social and political climate from Barks, did not draw the denizens of the Global South in the same

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stereotypical way that Barks did. Jenkins (2023) had observed that in "The Sharpie of the Culebra Cut," a supplementary story for The Life and Times, Rosa portrayed the locals "less as children who can be tricked out of their wealth and more as bemused adults making wry comments about the ignorance of their North American counterparts" (p. 23). The rising awareness of harmful stereotypes is exemplified in Rosa's depictions of Bombie the Zombie and Foola Zoola, both characters who originated from the aforementioned "Voodoo Hoodoo" in "The Empire-Builder from Calisota" (2009), part of *The Life and Times*, where he drew them in their redesigned version, which softened the stereotypical aspects of their designs. Rosa (n.d.) himself had admitted that he did not originally plan to include the events in "Voodoo Hoodoo" in *Life and Times*, due to its depiction of offensive racial stereotypes, among other problems.

Figure 4. Bombie as originally drawn by Carl Barks in "Voodoo Hoodoo"

Figure 5. Bombie as drawn by Don Rosa in "The Empire-Builder from Calisota" without the nose ring

Life and Times also depicted Scrooge interacting with chief Boo-Boo of the QwakQwak tribe. Chief Booboo was depicted as an anthropomorphic duck, like Scrooge and Donald, which set him apart from the native African characters which Barks depicted. This design choice left little room for physical stereotyping that Hall (1997) described. In their interaction, Scrooge tricked Booboo into giving his diamond mine for a quarter of a dollar. This is not portrayed as "Fair-dealing, clever ducks encounter stupid and occasionally violent foreigners who do not value the treasures they possess" (Immerwahr, 2020, p. 12), but rather a dirty scam played on a naive and too trusting of a man. While Booboo is still portrayed as backwards and primitive, he did not understand the worth of a dollar, Scrooge's action is portrayed as disgustingly dishonest, the sign of his overwhelming greed that blind him from making moral decision and the start of the rift on his relationship with his sisters who are disgusted by it.

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The differences in attitudes between Barks's and Rosa's time also showed in other aspects of their respective works. Like Barks, Rosa often drew treasure hunt stories set in distant locations. Rosa's first work, "The Son of the Sun" is one such story. First published in 1987 and published in Indonesian as "Sang Putra Matahari" in 2011, this story depicted a competition between Scrooge McDuck and his most well-known rival, Flintheart Glomgold, to find the lost Incan temple of Manco Capac which held within it many treasures. The story ended with the treasure, alongside the temple sunk beneath a lake, and Scrooge, in an echo to Barks's stories, bought the entire lake for one peso. Another one of Rosa's treasure hunt story is "Treasure of Ten Avatars," first published in 1996 and published in Indonesia in 2011 as "Harta Kesepuluh Avatar," in which the ducks compete against the greedy and corrupt Maharajah of Olinstan for the titular treasure, hidden deep in the lost city of Shambala and guarded by contraptions patterned after the ten avatars of the Hindu god Vishnu. In the end, the treasure got washed down the lost city's waterways, and was discovered by the impoverished people of Olinstan, who used them to start a new life, away from their tyrannical ruler. Yet the story still contained implicit unchallenged imperialist assumptions. Scrooge originally went to Olinstan to expand his business empire and open up job opportunities for the locals, all for the purpose of enriching himself. Even in the end, when it seemed like the ordinary people of Olinstan got the last laugh, Scrooge still took up the opportunity to offer up jobs to them. This also shows an inversion of Barks's usual aversion towards America's modernizing influences, where the locals, instead of turning into their "good old ways", instead left their traditional ruler into the embrace of the American capitalist.

But this does not mean that Rosa's adventure works do not question the imperialistic assumptions inherent in them. Rosa also has written stories that turn the assumptions of colonialism and imperialism on its head, both building on and reexamining the themes of Barks's works. One such work is "The Lost Charts of Columbus." Originally published in 1995, it was published in Indonesia in 2011 with the title "Peta Columbus yang Hilang." It is a sequel to Carl Barks's "The Golden Helmet." In the original Barks story, Donald and his nephews competed with Azure Blue and his lawyer Sharky for the titular lost Viking helmet that would grant anyone who owned it a legal claim to North America, based on a law from Charlemagne's time. In the Rosa sequel, Donald and his nephews found themselves in an even larger hunt against Blue and Sharky for even earlier claims of America, which culminated in them finding an ancient Phoenician ship and a stone tablet with a map on it on the coast of Cape Cod. Blue and Sharky stole the map from the ducks, but Huey, Dewey and Louie thwarted them by revealing that the ship and the stone map, in fact, belonged to the Adena, a group of Indigenous people of America and that the Phoenicians never reached America. But this was not the final twist in the story. At the end, when Donald and the nephews visited a museum exhibition displaying the artifacts that they have found throughout their adventure, they noticed that the map was not of the American coast, but rather of Europe. The story ends with a realization that, according to the ancient law, Europe belonged to the Adena people, and Donald wondered if the UN will repel the law, as they never officially did, with the revelation. Here, Rosa turned the logic of the colonizers against them by revealing that the historically colonized people had the claim for their colonizers' land all along, by the very law created by the colonizers.

Figure 6. The map was revealed to be Europe in "The Lost Chart of Columbus"

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Another example of this inversion of the colonialist logic is seen in "Island at the Edge of Time," first published in 1991 and published in Indonesia in 2011 as "Pulau Perbatasan Waktu." This is a story which hinges on the premise of time zones as Scrooge and his rival Glomgold competed to claim an island made out of gold which emerged at the Pacific ocean, right on the International Date Line. The island's location had made Scrooge and Glomgold to debate who claimed the island first, until Donald and his nephews revealed that Scrooge's pilot, Keoki, had (accidentally) claimed the island first for his country, an impoverished Pacific Island nation called Wokawoka, technically before both of them. Here, the Global South citizen is not only a sympathetic character, as Keoki is drawn normally, unlike the caricatures that filled Barks's works, and Donald and the nephews have grown quite sympathetic of his plight, but also, unlike the Barks natives who showered the ducks with riches, the ultimate victor of the treasure hunt.

Figure 7. Donald and the nephews pointing out that Keoki had claimed the island for Wokawoka before Scrooge in "Island at the Edge of Time"

CONCLUSION

This paper demonstrated that the depictions of colonialism and imperialism in Donald Duck comics are continuously changing and responding to the era's attitude towards them. It showed that even though Carl Barks tended to employ stereotypical depictions of non-Western people in his works, he did not necessarily depict Western imperialism as a good thing, and often depict the ducks' Western modernism as a destructive influence to the traditional societies they encountered. It also revealed that Barks had also begun to question the imperialist implications of the treasure hunt stories in Treasure of Marco Polo. This paper also shows that Don Rosa, in creating works that built on the works of Barks, had attempted to tone down the racial and ethnic stereotypes present in Barks's works, as shown by the way he portrayed Bombie and Foola Zoola in his own Life and Times of Scrooge McDuck. Rosa's adventure stories also similarly showed ambivalence towards its colonialist and imperialistic themes. While the imperialist assumptions remained unchallenged in some stories, others, such as "The Lost Chart of Columbus" and "Island at the Edge of Time" commented on the themes and even turned the colonialist and imperialist assumptions on its head. This paper demonstrated that, by showing the complicated and often ambivalent approach towards colonialism and imperialism in Donald Duck comics, which also evolved with time and differs by writers, the relationship between the comics and the readers, especially in the Global South, is demonstrably not as simple as Dorfman and Mattelart argued. It is hoped that this paper would add more nuances to, in Bryan's (2021) words, the "somewhat monolithic" scholarly approach to Donald Duck comics. More studies into the fan reception and community of Donald Duck comics in Indonesia, and how the readers interpret the messages of the comics are recommended, especially with the popularity of the comics with both children and adults before it ceased publication in 2020.

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