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Black Capes, White Spies: An Exploration of Visual Black Identity, Evolving Heroism and 'passing' in Marvel's Black Panther Comics and Mat Johnson's Graphic Novel, Incogengro

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Black Capes, White Spies:
An Exploration of Visual Black Identity, Evolving Heroism and 'Passing' in
Marvel's *Black Panther* Comics and Mat Johnson's Graphic Novel, *Incognegro*

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Bachelor of Arts, University of Virginia,
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A Thesis presented to the Graduate Faculty of The College of William &
Mary in Candidacy for the Degree of
Master of Arts


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the requirements for the degree of

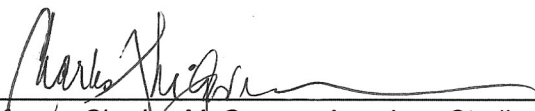
Master of Arts


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ABSTRACT

This thesis is a portfolio which contains two essays. The first essay, "Reclaiming Wakanda," is a character biography of the Black Panther comic character from his inception in 1966 until 2016. The work historicizes and politicizes a character written as apolitical by his creators while also placing him firmly within a legacy of Black Power, Civil Rights and other Black freedom movements of the second half of the 20th century. The second essay, "*Incogengro*: The Creation and Destruction of Black Identity in the 'Safety' of Harlem" considers how images and representations race and racial violence are constructed in graphic novel form when color is literally no longer present and within the confines of Harlem.

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This M.A. is dedicated to my late grandmother, Thelia Stringfield, and great-grandmother, Syvilla Jones, who would have been so proud of my accomplishments...

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Connector Essay

As an undergraduate student at the University of Virginia, my academic interests were undefined and (very) loosely related. The only things I knew were that I loved learning different languages, reading stories of all kinds, and explaining the significance of stories—and that I spent my free hours on the second floor of Clemons Library, nose buried in a comic or graphic novel. It was a French professor who explained to me that graphic novels did not have to be divorced from my work as a scholar—in fact, comic studies was an emerging and vibrant field. A few months later, it was in francophone graphic novels that I found an intersection of my interests: a way to explore stories, different cultures, and Blackness across the world in a manner that was politically and socially relevant.

As a graduate student, the goals of my scholarship remain similar. I find myself most interested in comics and race when they intersect in moments of social and political importance. I have long believed that because of comics' long-standing place as a staple of American culture, these often critically dismissed, but widely popular, stories both contain examples of American ideals and values and, often, commentaries on them. Comic writers and artists thus create not only art, but a time capsule of American society, that we as readers and scholars may use to explore the intricacies of our culture. And this where the aim of my scholarship has most shifted: instead of commitment to exploring other cultures, I decided to ask the same critical questions of my own culture. I chose not to live an unexamined life with my scholarship.

This thesis uses different but related methods to explore how comics and graphic novels can be useful for examining social movements and identity politics, how they may

knowingly or inadvertently complicate societal norms, and how they might give us a better understanding of race relations in different time periods.

In the first essay, I explore the evolution of Marvel's first Black superhero, Black Panther. There has been much discussion via social media surrounding the character in the last two or three years, beginning with the announcement that acclaimed essayist, Ta-Nehisi Coates, would be penning the latest installment of *Black Panther* issues, and leading up to the Ryan Coogler directed film slated to premiere in early 2018. Black Panther has gone from sideline hero to a household heroic name in a matter of months. The most interesting part of these recent developments of Black Panther is the quickness with which young Black adults, a generation often referred to as "Millennials," took hold of the hero, who has been around since 1966, claiming him as our own.¹

The events of recent years have shaken awake many young Black people. News reports of police assaults on unarmed Black people have been the backdrop of the years in which we came of age. In a similar vein as the "Black is Beautiful" movement of the 1970s, Black youth have increasingly begun to celebrate their heritage—a celebration characterized by a greater involvement in issues facing the Black community, and which most anyone with internet access can take part in, thanks to the growth of social media. In the midst of this renewed vigor, representation of Blackness in many arenas, including popular culture, has been encouraged and glorified. Unfortunately, occasionally the glorification happens at the expense of critical examination.

Black Panther the character was not created in the 2010s. His history begins in the 1960s, 1966, to be exact. His creation came amid the turmoil of the Civil Rights

¹ For a taste of the public's excitement over the rediscovery of Black Panther, just check out the hashtag #BlackPantherSoLit on Twitter.

Movement and the beginning of Black Power. As a character, he would change against the backdrop of social movements and the evolution of beliefs and ideals, until the character became a symbol of Black pride for African-American millennials. In my first essay, I explore Black Panther's messy and complex history, creating a character biography of Marvel's first Black hero and his ever-changing politics, based primarily on the authors that penned him.

The second essay takes a more literary critical approach to achieve a similar goal. Mat Johnson, a contemporary writer, pens a complex graphic novel called *Incognegro* in 2006 which literarily, visually, and literally challenges the color line. His protagonist, Zane Pinchback, is a fair skinned African-American man, who writes for a Harlem based newspaper and uses his appearance as a disguise to infiltrate lynchings in deep South in the early 1930s—the tail end of the Harlem Renaissance era. Zane, like both Johnson himself and the historically anti-lynching activist Walter White, is an African-American man who could pass for white, and in the author's note, he explains that he was interested in writing a story in which a man like him would be an asset, rather than a marginalized part of American society. Of all the time periods he could have chosen, Johnson decides that Zane would be almost like a superhero during the end of the Harlem Renaissance. This begs the question: what is it about the Harlem Renaissance that allows for this level of racial exploration and what does the graphic novel add to or complicate the representation of racial fluidity?

These two essays engage two different forms of sequential art, the serial comic and the graphic novel, reading them historically and literarily for meaning.² Despite the

² Deborah Whaley provides a useful distinction between the fields of comics studies and sequential arts studies, insisting that it is possible to be both, but that they are not synonymous:

differences in production and presentation of the texts I consider—one set an ongoing series of stories and books traversing decades beginning in the 1960s to present, the other published in its entirety in 2006, but focusing on a time some sixty odd years in the past—there exists in both a clear line of connection: visual depictions of racial violence perpetrated by the “Klan.”³ Both of these essays consider the ways the sequential art form explores issues of racial identity, marginalization, violence and powerlessness at the intersection of legal and extralegal state of power, as well as organized Black resistance to it—whether it be by donning a Black Panther costume and physically fighting or using one’s fair skin to become a spy.

Over the course of the two essays, I grapple with certain themes and ideas: graphic novels that attempt to work through the identity politics of Blackness and what it means to unpack multiple identities within Blackness-- and to do so visually.

Additionally, I assess how graphic novels and comics can offer new lenses through which we may understand broader social movements, like the Harlem Renaissance, the Civil Rights Movement, the Black Power Movement and the current Black Lives Matter Movement. On the issue of the form these questions take I ask: what does visual art say that words can’t? What does the combination of the two add? What do our artists mean? What do the artists themselves add to the text? Are they useful? What do they represent?

“Sequential art studies constitutes the larger spectrum of work that combines image in sequence to produce a narrative...while comic book studies entail the smaller subgenre of images and text (comic strips...graphic novels, and comic books). ...Sequential art is more expansive in its combined object of study.” (13) Deborah Whaley, *Black Women in Sequence: Re-Inking Comics, Graphic Novels, and Anime*. University of Washington Press: Seattle. (2016)

³ I use “Klan” in quotations because Mat Johnson’s *Incognegro* depicts the white supremacist American terror group, the Ku Klux Klan, but Don McGregor’s *Black Panther* run addresses the historical KKK group, but it is unclear for most of “T’Challa versus the K/Clan,” whether he is representing the actual historical group or fictional group inspired by the KKK.

Does it matter about their backgrounds? What place does Black heroism have in all of this?

Comics and the comic arts are more than capes and tights, or the “funny pages” in the Sunday paper. They are rooted in legacies of art, history, literature, and philosophy and are deeply inspired by the world in which their creators come of age. Visual arts offer a new way to try to develop answers to questions around race, identity, history and social justice that have yet to be unraveled.

Reclaiming Wakanda

Introduction

The comic character Black Panther is one of Marvel's most beloved creations as the company's first Black superhero. This figure has come into a moment of renaissance; acclaimed essayist Ta-Nehisi Coates has penned the latest serial, which began in 2016. Coates, famous for his sharp critical articles in *the Atlantic* and his book *Between the World and Me*, has been hailed as the James Baldwin of our times.⁴ The son of a member of the Black Panther political party, Coates' take on the historic Marvel comics character posits the Black Panther of 1966 as a symbol of revolution, infusing the story with both African and African-American thought, poetry, art, language, and history.

Black Panther has undergone a lengthy and complex evolution to become the political allegory Ta-Nehisi Coates is creating with his story installment. Stan Lee and Jack Kirby's original Black Panther was not intended to become a political allegory.⁵ Despite the lack of concrete connection between their character and the burgeoning Black Panther Party of the time, it is nearly impossible, looking back on the legacy and

⁴ In praise for Coates' book, *Between the World and Me*, prolific author Toni Morrison says, "I've been wondering who might fill the intellectual void that plagued me after James Baldwin died. Clearly it is Ta-Nehisi Coates."

(<http://www.penguinrandomhouse.com/books/220290/between-the-world-and-me-by-ta-nehisi-coates/9780812993547/>; Accessed September 7, 2017)

⁵ In his work *Marvel Comics: The Untold Story*, Sean Howe writes that "most notably, the profile of the Black Panther (his name now gaining associations Lee and Kirby could never have guessed) had risen when he joined the cast of *The Avengers* in early 1968," indicating that that the two had no intention of politicizing their first Black hero. (Howe, *Marvel Comics*, 97) African-American Studies scholar, Adilifu Nama decides this significant coincidence can be explained by Jung's theory of synchronicity, calling it "a textbook example of Carl Gustav Jung's notion of synchronicity, whereby coincidental events speak to broader underlying dynamics." (Nama, *Super Black*, 42)

evolution of the character, to detangle the character from the political moment—and all the moments he would come to represent.

My work argues that the Black Panther’s transformation as a comic character has come to be conflated with changes in society and a reflection of revolutionary moments for Black America. Writers of Black Panther and readers alike over the last fifty years have seen the character as a symbol whose importance and value outstrips his reputation. My work situates the character firmly in a legacy of revolution, civil rights, and empowerment, while working through the complicated identity politics of the character and to what extent he can represent “Black Pride.” With these aims in mind, my essay asks: how effective is Black Panther as a character at being representative of a Black American movement? What are the factors at play which complicate the narrative of Black Panther as the undisputed paragon of Black America in comics? In what ways do changes in the creative team, including writers of a variety of races and backgrounds, affect Black Panther’s message? Has the original story, coupled with these changes, necessitated a reclamation of the character and his home country of Wakanda by Black writers in today’s America?

“Introducing the Sensational Black Panther!”⁶

Fantastic Four, number 52, July 1966

Readers were introduced to America’s most memorable Black superhero and his world through a white lens both inside the comic and out. Black Panther first began as prototype Black superhero, Coal Tiger. Coal Tiger was a member of the Inhumans,

⁶ The tagline comes from the cover of Black Panther’s first appearance in *Fantastic Four no. 52*. See Index A: Lee and Kirby, *Fantastic Four no. 52*, July 1966; Marvel Comics (Virginia Commonwealth University Comics Art Collection, hereby abbreviated as VCU CAC)



Figure 1 *Fantastic Four* #52, July 1966, cover

another of Marvel’s superpowered groups, like the Avengers or the X-Men. While Coal Tiger would never make it to the newsstand, he would be revamped and distributed as the Black Panther in *Fantastic Four* #52.⁷ White author and artist team, Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, created the character. Black Panther, like the persona of Spider-Man, Superman or Batman, was only one half of a dual identity that created an entire person. Underneath the panther suit was T’Challa, King of the fictional African nation of Wakanda. Readers took their first tour of the country

through the eyes of the Fantastic Four, the first family of comics.

In *Fantastic Four* # 52, the titular group is depicted riding in through the air on a spacecraft-like vehicle to meet the “African Chieftain,” who has sent them this sci-fi gift.⁸ The reader learns that King T’Challa of Wakanda, has sent for them to take part in “the greatest hunt of all,” which, in a subversion of expectations, posits the Fantastic Four as the prey and the Black Panther as the poacher.⁹ The remaining pages narrate the hunt and the Black Panther emerges as a formidable opponent who has carefully researched his adversaries to find the most effective ways to defeat or neutralize each one of the Fantastic Four: first, he captures Johnny Storm, The Human Torch, in a fire proof trap; then the Black Panther uses his sense of smell to detect Sue Storm, the Invisible Woman,

⁷ Howe, *Marvel Comics*, 70 & 85.

⁸ *Fantastic Four* #52, p. 7

⁹ *Fantastic Four* #52, p. 8

and sprays her with a harmless sleep gas; he then uses Benn Grimm's own strength to run him into a high voltage refrigerator unit that freezes him; and finally, he contains Reed Richards, Mr. Fantastic, who is able to stretch his body to any shape imaginable, in titanium cuffs. The Four are saved by Johnny's blundering college roommate, who inadvertently hitched a ride to Wakanda, and frees Mr. Fantastic. Only then is Mr. Fantastic able to free the rest of the team and confront the Black Panther. Naturally, the reader is left with a cliff hanger, leaving the reason for the hunt unresolved until issue number 53.

The dominant theme of the premiere issue is the sheer *incredibility* of the Black

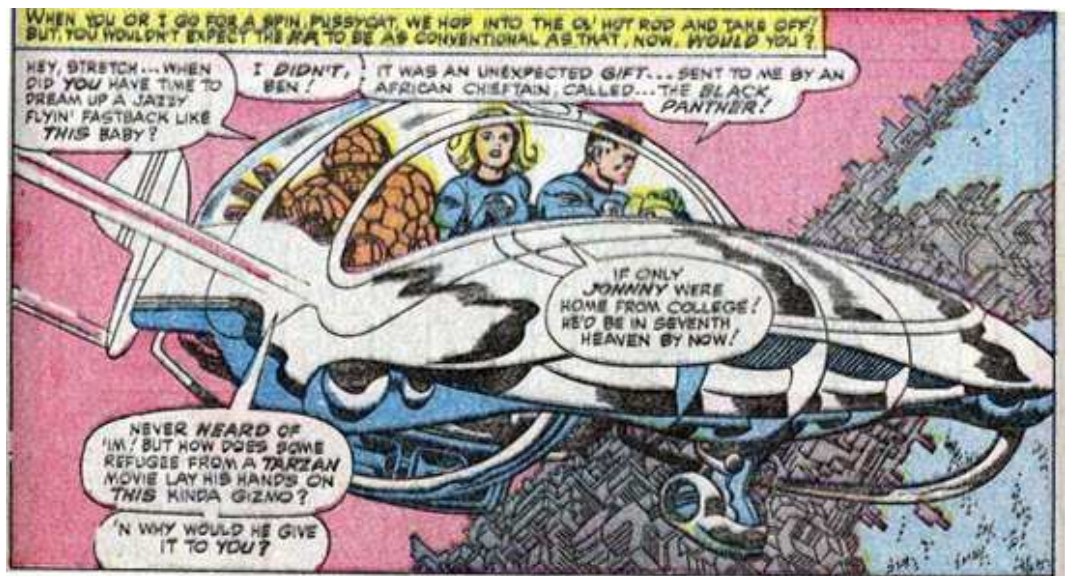


Figure 2 Fantastic Four, #52, p. 6

Panther himself and of his home country, Wakanda. Wakanda is awesome to behold, a stunning technologically advanced nation amid jungle foliage. But for the Fantastic Four, who has a hard time reconciling their preconceived notions of Africa with the nation that unfolds before them, it is also incredible.

As they fly over Wakanda, Reed Richards asks, “The jungle looks so *primitive*—so underdeveloped! Are you sure we have reached Wakanda territory?”¹⁰ Soon, the natural jungle observed from the space craft is juxtaposed with a man-made jungle of Wakanda, which is able to produce such devices as a communication device that can send a message “half way round the world” and create methods for neutralizing the powers of the Fantastic Four.¹¹ The conditions which Reed identifies as primitive—the jungle, the tribal garb and the presence of Black bodies— are truthfully indicative of an absence of colonial touch, if we are to read this as representative of an African perspective. However, given that this is a representation of Blackness from an American perspective, also, the Fantastic Four is also having to contend with African-American identity, a form of Blackness that they are used to or stereotypes they hold.

One must consider this African perspective because Lee and Kirby do not write an African-American hero from Georgia— they create an African king. In this story, we must contend with T’Challa’s African heritage, though his stories were produced and told in America. This confuses his identity. He is passed off as an African-American character, both in the sense that we tend to read Black bodies in America as African-American and in the sense that he is an African in American media. This presents us with a character with layers of tangled identities that one might gloss over by applying the monolithic moniker of “Black,” without considering the multiplicity of identities the term encompasses.

¹⁰ *Fantastic Four* #52, p. 12

¹¹ *Fantastic Four* #52, p. 7

Meanwhile, the inhabitants of this technological jungle appear in the very “Tarzan”-like manner that Ben Grimm alludes to in figure 2. They wear tribal garb, live with an established monarchy and believe deeply in tradition and spirituality—yet, as the Fantastic Four ascertain, the citizens of Wakanda are “intelligent enough” to be able to produce advanced mechanisms and create methods for neutralizing the superhero powers of the Fantastic Four.¹² Black Panther and his world are nothing but an enigma to the Fantastic Four, a series of contending forces and complexities that make it difficult for them to tease out the true intention of the character. With the introduction of Black Panther, Sean Howe, author of *Marvel Comics: The Untold Story* writes that Lee might have been “seizing an opportunity rather than just exploiting a trend.”¹³ As the first Black superhero of a major comic dynasty, Black Panther becomes a strong attempt on the part of Marvel comics to diversify their books and appeal to a similarly diversifying audience. Howe also writes that when audiences complained about the lack of Black comic characters, “Lee had an assistant editor write a letter pointing out the scant examples, in a delicate mix of backpedaling and time-buying.”¹⁴ One way of understanding the character, then, is that Black Panther was thrown onto the comic page with little intention other than to become representative of a Black constituency—a token. In the same letter, Lee’s editor refers to Panther as a Negro character, a term which implies African-American, though T’Challa is given a clear African heritage and provenance.¹⁵ He merely visits America on trips with the Avengers. This sort of careless categorizing—a kind of thoughtless and uninformed “pan-Africanism”—implies Lee and his team were more

¹² *Fantastic Four* #52, p. 7

¹³ Howe, *Marvel Comics*, 97

¹⁴ Howe, *Marvel Comics*, 97

¹⁵ Howe, *Marvel Comics*, 97-98

interested in the appearance of diversity, rather than attention to the distinct personal stories, heritages and identities which create meaningful diversity in content.

While written by an American creative team, it is the impulse of a reader to categorize a phenotypically dark character in a comic book as African-American based on Lee and Kirby's biases and the times in which they lived. This is damaging in a myriad of ways, but most importantly, it ignores the diversity of the African Diaspora. Presenting an African character as representative of African-Americans, conflates two extraordinarily different experiences. Stan Lee's original Black Panther is very distinctly African but is still 'othered' in a manner consistent with the treatment of African-Americans.

To make matters more complicated, we must consider the ways in which Stan Lee and Jack Kirby denied their token Black character a cultural heritage. Had Black Panther been African-American, he would have been discriminated against but at least his heritage would have been in line with a long history of Black people in America. African-American readers thus might have been denied an opportunity to culturally connect with a Black hero, but they instead would have been able to connect with African culture. Yet with an entire continent of potential histories, cultures and legacies to draw from, Lee and Kirby chose to situate their Panther in the *fictional* African nation of Wakanda.

Wakanda has since become one of the many places we think about when we think about Afro-futuristic utopias, as it is inhabited solely by Black people and it is near impossible to find the nation without help from a native citizen. But it is difficult to separate the white creation of Wakanda from its intended function of providing a space for Black prosperity. White artists colonized an African space (albeit an imagined one),

but created within it an imagined world for potential Black expressions of freedom, power, and prosperity. While this is in line with Marvel’s company-wide interest at the time in mixing ancient civilizations and advanced technologies, scholars, such as Adilifu Nama, believe T’Challa “symbolized a politically provocative and wildly imaginative convergence of African tradition with advanced technology but... also stood as a progressive racial symbol and anti-colonialist critique of the economic exploitation of Africa.”¹⁶ Adilifu argues that T’Challa is racially progressive and an Afro-futuristic commentary on the ability of Black people to create a technologically advanced, and relatively peaceful society, outside of the regular constraints of colonialism and the history of slavery. Yet, it is likely that Lee and Kirby sought to create a character which represented African-American identity, but by introducing a fictional African cultural identity, they unwittingly complicated the character to the point that he no longer quite represented Black Americans nor Africans.

Nevertheless, it seems clear that we are to read T’Challa, at least in one sense, as



Figure 3 *Fantastic Four* #52 p. 24

a product of Black America, based on some of the stylistic

¹⁶ Howe, *Marvel Comics*, 86; Adilifu Nama, *Super Black: American Popular Culture and Black Superheroes*. Austin: University of Texas Press. (2011) 43.

choices of the creative team. One such moment occurs at the end of Black Panther's premiere in *Fantastic Four* number 52. Despite the desire to mark the mysterious black cloaked figure in the issue as a villain, and a wild creature to be tamed, an idea which engages with the trope of the hyper masculine Black man in fiction, the issue takes an interesting turn towards reconciliation. By the end, the *Fantastic Four* and Black Panther put their differences aside to have a conversation. Black Panther lifts his mask saying, "[it] is not for concealment—but rather a symbol of my panther power."¹⁷ (See Figure 3 below). This iconic moment begs us to consider W.E.B. DuBois' famous explanation of "double consciousness," and "the veil," for in this moment despite the backdrop of Africa, Black Panther enacts a tenet of the American Black experience: "The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world, . . . but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. it is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity."¹⁸ By actively removing the exterior part of his identity, Black Panther visually represents the face that African-American show the world, which is the part of his identity that cause the white members of the *Fantastic Four* so much distress, as it is this mask that they understand as "enemy," not the face of T'Challa. Black Panther is not a slave descent African-American, but the space he occupies with the *Fantastic Four* and in his historical moment, places him as a representative and representation of the community.

¹⁷ Lee, *Fantastic Four #52* in *Panther Epic Collection*, 1966, p. 24

¹⁸ W.E.B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*. New York: Dover Publications (1994); originally published Chicago: A. C. McClurg (1903)

In the same scene, T'Challa also calls the mask “a symbol of [his] panther power.”¹⁹ Substitute “panther” for “Black,” and the sentence turns to the question of Black power and the buzz over the newly founded Black Panther Party, which permeates the story in important ways. The Black Panther Party was founded by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale in October of 1966. The group considered themselves “revolutionary nationalists” and “were inspired by sweeping independence movements abroad yet committed to Black self-determination at home, as articulated in their own, soon to be popular, ten-point program.”²⁰ They actively sought an end to Black oppression, but as a group whose influences were rooted in anti-facism, socialism, Marxism and Maoism, they often extended their fight to include all oppressed peoples.²¹ The Black Panther Party’s vision of freedom included, but was not limited to, an end to police brutality, social justice, economic equality and peace. Self-determination was an important piece to achieve these goals: Black people would have to empower themselves to own and support their own businesses, schools, and hospitals and take pride in themselves and their work. This notion of self-determination became a part developing the idea of Black Power.

¹⁹ Lee, *Fantastic Four #52*, p. 24

²⁰ Peniel E. Joseph, *Waiting Til The Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power In America*. New York: Henry Holt Books (2006), 176-177.

²¹ For example, one of the tenants of the Ten Point Program, after being revised from the original version drafted in 1966, read: “We want freedom. We want power to determine the destiny of our Black and oppressed communities.” (Accessed on the [blacklivesmattersyllabus.com](http://www.blacklivesmattersyllabus.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/BPP_Ten_Point_Program.pdf): http://www.blacklivesmattersyllabus.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/BPP_Ten_Point_Program.pdf); Peniel E. Joseph, *Waiting Til The Midnight Hour: A Narrative History of Black Power In America*. New York: Henry Holt Books (2006.) 176-177.

Black Power was, as Stokely Carmichael, the originator of the term, said, about, “waking up our people.”²² Much of Black Panther, the character’s, embodiment of the Black Power movement was not as evident in this first depiction, but was more prominent in the later versions, when he was not defined against the Fantastic Four, and was allowed to develop his own identity in his first solo series in *Jungle Fever*. This tenuous connection to the Black Power movement becomes quite remarkable when one considers the real-world events happening in the summer of 1966. This first issue is published in the same summer that the first cry of Black Power is heard in Stokely Carmichael’s now legendary speech on July 28, 1966 that would usher in the Black Panther Party in October of 1966.²³ Even though Stan Lee claims that Black Panther was not meant to be a representative of this moment of Black history, it is impossible to detangle this character, his legacy, and his significance from the revolution happening in Black America at this time.

The Black Panther’s initial appearance in *Fantastic Four* #52 has two potential interpretations: the first marks him as the representative of a new, more racially diverse comic culture,²⁴ and the other marks him as a vehicle through which artists, particularly white artists, explored and attempted to unpack racial difference in problematic, yet occasionally insightful ways. Over the course of the next few decades, representation and

²² Van Deburg, *New Day in Babylon*. 19

²³ Carmichael’s “Black Power” speech can be accessed on encyclopedia.com: <http://www.encyclopedia.com/history/dictionaries-thesauruses-pictures-and-press-releases/black-power-speech-28-july-1966-stokely-carmichael>; Note that Lee and Kirby still predate the Black Panther Party with their character.

²⁴ Ramzi Fawaz’s book *The New Mutants: Superheroes and the Radical Imagination of American Comics* does excellent work in positing Fantastic Four as a site of complexity, diversity, and expanding and stretching our definitions of not only gender, but also, “Americanness.” Fawaz, *The New Mutants*

handling of race in *Black Panther* comics would become even more complicated, and more explicit.

Black Panther's Guest Appearances in Late 1960s Comics

Black Panther would weave in and out of the backgrounds of several of Marvel's big-name books for the next few years: *The Tales of Suspense of Captain America and Iron Man*, *the Avengers*, and of course, more *Fantastic Four* comics. Often referred to as the "African Avenger," Black Panther would be othered, marked as dangerous-- an "outsider-within." One of the most poignant examples of this occur in *Tales of Suspense: Captain America and Iron Man*, number 98. The issue, which was published in February 1968, features a panel highlighted by Captain America's declaration: "I just can't be sure of their intentions." The statement is preceded by the narration, "But there from the shadows—silent figures rushing towards me—led by the Black Panther." (See figure 4)

There claims to be no connection between Stan Lee's Black Panther comic and



Figure 4 *Tales of Suspense: Captain America and Iron Man* #98

the Black Panther Party, but in this issue the connection

is inescapable. Captain America is often hailed as the "most American Superhero," so in this panel, we will posit him as representative of America—in particular white America, the America that holds the majority of power and sits atop the social hierarchy. Captain

America is unsure of the “silent figures” coming from the “shadows” because he fears what they may do—what they may be capable of. Their potential power proves to be a threat to Captain America’s status quo. Depicted as armed and anarchic, an image only enhanced by the actual presence of guns, the Black Panther Party, was heavily surveilled and attacked by the United States government for the entirety of their existence, because the federal government was unsure of the group’s intentions.²⁵

Despite teaming up with America’s heroes, Black Panther’s humanity would continue to be questioned. On page 3 of issue 98, Captain America says of Black Panther, “Whatever his purpose, he’s fighting like a man!” Until Captain America bestows the characteristic of humanity upon him, Black Panther is often described as animalistic, a trait that is only enhanced when we consider quotes from Black Panther himself: “The Black Panther has caught the scent of the world’s most dangerous predatory beast—the scent of man!”²⁶ Who, then, is man, if Black Panther appears to count himself as a race apart?

²⁵ Federal Surveillance of African-Americans from 1920-1984 archive through the College of William and Mary:
http://go.galegroup.com.proxy.wm.edu/gdsc/i.do?action=interpret&id=3ENB&v=2.1&u=viva_wm&it=aboutCollections&p=GDSC&sw=w&authCount=1

²⁶ *Tales of Suspense: Captain America and Iron Man*, volume 1, number 98; Marvel Comics: February 1968 (6)

In his various appearances, Black Panther is also consistently and readily misnamed or addressed in a manner that implies inferiority on his part. In *Tales of*



Figure 5 Avengers #52, May 1968

Suspense: Iron Man and Captain America,

number 99, an adversary calls him

“hireling,” to which Black Panther heatedly

replies, “Hireling?! You are addressing a

king—the chieftan of all the Wakandas.”²⁷ In

The Avengers, number 52, May 1968, in an

issue whose contents remain relevant given

the tenuous relationship between Black

communities and police forces these days,

Black Panther is falsely accused of murder, prompting a police officer to treat him as a

criminal and deliberately misname him as “T’Charlie.” This misnaming works to, first,

Americanize Black Panther (T’Challa.) Rather than properly pronouncing his African

name, the police officer refers to him as a name that includes a more American name.

The process of giving him an American name then positions T’Challa not as an African,

but as African-American. The officer further assumes power over T’Challa, by calling

him “boy,” and finishes by using a diminutive of the name Charles, “Charlie,” to signal

T’Challa’s inferiority, both practices that dates back to slavery and remained prevalent

through, and beyond, the age of Jim Crow.

²⁷ *Tales of Suspense: Iron Man and Captain America*, volume 1, number 99; Marvel Comics: March 1968 (8)

Black Panther's appearances in early comics refuted the idea that his character was unrelated to the Civil Rights Struggle of the 1960s. This is not to say that purely African people or characters were not discriminated against, but rather that though Lee and Kirby presented Black Panther as African, much of their writing, his dialogue, and interactions with enemies and allies alike was more representative of Black America. This connection was shown most clearly in Don McGregor's Black Panther series in the 1970s, a comic that was not self-titled but featured him prominently: *Jungle Action Featuring the Black Panther*. In McGregor's comic, Black Panther would face betrayals from in Wakanda, former friends turned enemies, and most notably: The Clan.

***"The most amazing, most off-beat superhero of all time."*²⁸**

Don McGregor and the 1970s *Jungle Action*

Don McGregor, a "diminutive, fast-talking," comic writer from Rhode Island, would take Stan Lee's brilliant but extraordinarily skeptical and distrustful African King, and fully flesh out him in his relationship to his home country of Wakanda. McGregor started as a proof-reader and made it clear he was not thrilled with the previous *Jungle Action* comics upon being assigned the books, saying: "It was pretty racist stuff and I couldn't believe Marvel was publishing it."²⁹ Instead of having Black Panther as the side-kick or sub-plot in a myriad of Fantastic Four or Avengers adventures, McGregor had the opportunity to write *Jungle Action*, a series that featured Black Panther in his natural habitat.

²⁸ Taken from the cover of *Jungle Action Featuring Black Panther*, volume 1, number 8; Marvel Comics: January 1973

²⁹ Howe, *Marvel Comics*, 132.

However, writing Black Panther in Wakanda would not be enough on its own to address problems behind the character. *Jungle Action* books were on the chopping block. McGregor admitted, “Jungle books didn’t sell. I think [the editors] figured, ‘Well, we’ll give Don a jungle book, it’ll die and we’ll have given him a chance.’”³⁰ Still, while the books lacked the option to subscribe to the *Jungle Action* magazine, which might have attributed to the low sales, fan support would be enough to keep the series alive for two years.³¹ Fans, writers, and editors alike seemed to understand and were willing to work with the power and potential a character like Black Panther could have in a way that either Lee and Kirby were ignorant to or were aware of and ignored. The *Jungle* books were dying and the only way to save them, in the eyes of Lee and other editors, was to introduce the *Avengers*. McGregor would not do it; he said, “it was important for a Black hero not to have to have white heroes come in to save the day.”³²

In *Jungle Action* number 7, Steve Garber of the Marvel Comics Group Editorial Board writes an emotive and urgent essay defending T’Challa in *Jungle Re-Actions* (the section for letters to the writers and responses from those writers):

“T’Challa, king of the Wakandan nation, heir to its land, son of its mythos and its past, guardian of its future. Perhaps the first jungle hero who’s not a foreign import. And that’s one precedent which badly needed shattering.”

³⁰ Howe, *Marvel Comics*, 132.

³¹ The major difference between using reprinted collections of comics or archival individual issues is the ability to look through the “extra” pages. Collected reprints often only have the actual 16 or so page comics, in order, from the beginning. While extraordinarily useful if only to easily access the story, they do not often reprint the original advertisements, subscription letters, and letters to the editor pages, as well as “Stan’s Soapbox,” Lee’s corner to relay news or otherwise engage personally with fans.

³² Howe, *Marvel Comics*, 181.

T'Challa. Regal, sophisticated, even urbane—yet part of the world that birthed him, the diametrical opposite of the pulp-magazine white-man-or-woman-gone-wild-syndrome. T'Challa and his people are Black men who have abandoned their roles as spear-carriers and safari boys to take up the rools of technology and use them to preserve and protect, rather than exploit, the continent called Africa.

You gotta admit: it's more than a little intriguing."³³ (See figure 6 below)



Figure 6 Jungle Re-actions page, Jungle Action #7

Gerber would end his letter stating: “now it’s up to you. To put it crassly, if you don’t buy it, we don’t get to produce it anymore.”³⁴ And did fans step up to the plate.

Every issue featured lengthy positive reviews, thanking McGregor for his take on Black Panther. In one issue, reader Ralph Maccio wrote in:

“... You have unobstrusively helped advance the cause of the Negro far more than the melodramatic ‘relevancy’ of Marvel’s competitors than was big a few years ago.”

³³ Don McGregor, *Jungle Action Featuring the Black Panther*, volume 1, number 7; Marvel Comics, November 1973.

³⁴ Don McGregor, *Jungle Action Featuring the Black Panther*, volume 1, number 7; Marvel Comics, November 1973.

Marvel Comics and Don McGregor would keep audiences captivated through the 18 issue “Panther’s Rage” storyline first featured in *Jungle Action*. It wasn’t until McGregor introduced his next story arc that sales began to severely endanger Black Panther’s future: “T’Challa vs. the Clan.”



Figure 7 Front Cover of *Jungle Action* #19



Figure 8 Inside Cover of *Jungle Action* #19

“In the heart of civilization, T’Challa battles the primitive power of the Clan!”³⁵

Issue number 19 of *Jungle Action*, published in January of 1976, was the

beginning of a

new saga. The front cover uses the subtitle: “In the heart of civilization, T’Challa battles the primitive power of the Clan.” However, a small discrepancy arises. On the inside cover, the Panther battles the “Klan,” spelled with a K. This is a small, but important, and most telling discrepancy. Using Clan with a ‘C’ on the title page, even though it is also graced by the white cloaked figures characteristic of the Klu Klux Klan, as well as including a Black figure under one of the hoods on the cover of figure 8, allows for a

³⁵ Don McGregor, *Jungle Action Featuring the Black Panther*, volume 1, number 19; Marvel Comics, January 1976.

degree of critical distance between the comics' adversaries and the historical vigilantes responsible for terrorizing Black communities and racial violence.

The discrepancy enables the Marvel Comics Groups to sell comics by deceiving readers who would potentially be turned off by a negative portrayal of the KKK and parents wanting to shield their children from a violent and dangerous period in American history. While some people likely would view the cover and immediately think of the KKK, the one changed letter veils the potentially sticky political statement in fiction. This discrepancy is no mistake. Indeed, front covers and inside covers of comics often varied and were rarely identical to each other. Monica Lynne, the female love interest and native-born Georgian, later in the issue refers to the band as 'Klan' with a 'K,' as does Black Panther on that very same page. Thus, this particular comic must be and is meant to be read politically. It references James Baldwin and Eldrige Cleaver—both important cultural commentators and writers who intellectually engaged with the idea of Black Power, though admittedly in drastically different ways.³⁶ Additionally, the comic is set in Georgia, a state in the deep South with a long history with racial violence.

The discrepancies between the two covers, however, do not end there. On the inside front cover, the artist still attempts to fictionalize the Klan, yet all of the historical elements which distinguish the Klan are still there. Instead of having the Klansmen where crosses around their necks or as wooden fixtures stuck in the ground to be burned, the artist stylizes them as cemetery grave markers. And, once again, Black Panther becomes the focal point of the rather than the Klansmen: on the inside cover, Billy Graham, the artist of this issue, positions the Black Panther in a tree above the Klan. The dark

character is illuminated by moonlight and he is depicted, in inserts above the main image, in three different asymmetric panels. The asymmetrical quadrilaterals are juxtaposed with the sleekness of both Black Panther's costume and demeanor. The night time setting, the dark costume and the deliberate distance between the Klansmen and the Black Panther indicate need for stealth, yet the jagged panels which are reminiscent of fractured glass, foreshadow that his next adventure cannot be resolved linearly, cleanly and at once. It will throw him off guard. The tree panels above the main image represent T'Challa on an uneven playing field, even though in this instance, he's on top. There is power and elegance in his stances but precarity as well.

The two covers depict some important inversions. Instead of Black Panther stalking like a jungle cat, his stances and positioning are more akin to a bird of prey as he sits in the branches of the tree in the background of interior cover. The change from a jungle cat to a bird of prey becomes a power play. The bird is infamously a cat's favorite prey, but this change allows for a transformation of the historical power dynamics between the races. We can see the transformation if we consider the configuration of characters and elements in the scene depicted on the interior cover of *Jungle Action #19* and compare them to the elements of a lynching photo.

In many lynching photos, the following basic elements are present: a Black man in a tree and white men on the ground before the tree. In a real lynching photograph, the white men would be facing the tree, unlike in the interior cover, where the white cloaked Klansmen huddle together and face away from the tree. This shifts the focus from the tree and what appears in the tree, to the men in the foreground of the image. Typically, crosses, if present, would appear as decoration on the robes of the Klansmen, on the

chest, or would be staked in the ground, and potentially set ablaze. On the interior cover, the crosses do not appear on the robes, but as grave markers in a cemetery, behind the Klansmen. Finally, unlike in a lynching photograph, the Black body is not hanging from the tree, but perched in the branches of the tree. This is a remarkable difference: lynching photos posit the Black body as powerless, unable to control his body, unable to prevent his own weight and gravity from killing him. The power in a lynching photograph goes to the white crowd, but on this interior cover, the power is reversed as the positioning of the Black body is reversed. This inversion of a lynching photo would be one in which the Black body, the Black Panther would hold the power. Simply by reversing elements of an image historically used to terrorize Black communities, the cover creates an image that we may associate with heroism and power.



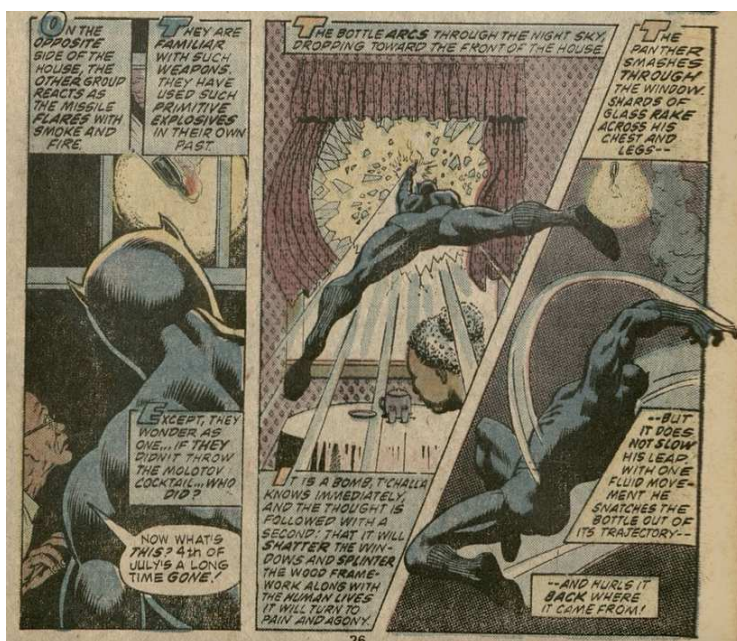
As the Black Panther versus the Klan arc unfolds in the next few issues, the “Klan’s” identity becomes even more complicated. It is uncovered that there was indeed the Klu Klux Klan of southern racial terrorism fame, but the group that Black Panther deals with, is a subgroup, masquerading as the historic Klan. T’Challa, as a result, has to deal with the legacy

of both the real Klan and this (un)related, though similarly terroristic Clan wreaking havoc in Monica Lynne’s Georgia.

“Some of their audience read or heard the tale entirely different.”³⁷

The (Un)Intentional Legacy of Black Protest, Rebellion and Justice

In spite of the desire to divorce the comic world from the atrocities of the real one—the attempt to create utopias or super powered heroes—it is impossible to read Black Panther without the backdrop of the Civil Rights Movement and Black Power seeping into its pages. From T’Challa’s unconscious use of rhetoric reminiscent of slave rebellion (see figure 9) to his symbolic fight versus the Klan in 1976, whatever the original intention was of the creators of this particular character, T’Challa, over the



course of his first decade in print, became a symbol of rebellion, a protector of the underdog and an active pursuer of justice—all in the name of his fellow Wakandans, or in the case of *T’Challa versus the Klan*, the African-American Lynne family.

Figure 10 Black Panther throwing a Molotov cocktail out the Lynnes' home that had been launched by the Klan. *Jungle Action featuring The Black Panther*, no 19, Jan 1976

Though readers did not necessarily want to read *Black*

Panther in a way that used him as a tool to deal with legacy of racial violence against

³⁷ Don McGregor & Billy Graham, *Jungle Action Featuring the Black Panther* #22; Marvel Comics, July 1976. (16)

Black people, Black history and Black activism, as the narrator aptly notes in issue 22, “Writers and story-tellers often think they are communicating one idea in their tales—and just as often learn that some of their audience read or heard the tale entirely



Figure 8 Protestor Edward Crawford throws a canister of teargas away from the crowd on August 13, 2014 in Ferguson, MO. Photo by Robert Cohen

*different.
The way
they want
to be read
or hear
things.” In
the issue,
Monica is
imagining*

a different ending to a tragic story. She turns it into a heroic epic which stars Black Panther. In many cases, that is what is occurring here. The process of working through Black Panther’s presence in comics since inception has been one of retelling the story, emphasize the side that is present, but has yet to be heard.

While it is possible to find the panel shown in figure 10 reminiscent of protestors from any generation attempting to get rid of Molotov cocktails—it draws a very specific parallel to an iconic protest moment of today. To a millennial reader coming to back-issues of Black Panther in the era of Black Lives Matter, Black Panther throwing a Molotov cocktail out of the Lynne’s home is eerily prescient of the iconic photograph of Edward Crawford throwing a canister of teargas away from protestors in Ferguson, MO in August 2014. The summer of 2014 saw protests erupt all over the nation in response to the killing of unarmed Black teenager, Michael Brown, by the police. In this context, Black Panther becomes a symbol of a Black hero that has been fighting the same struggles we currently face for decades. While it is very possible, and convincing, to read Black Panther as a historical protector and proponent of racial justice based on his adventures, character history and dialogue, it is important to remember that until 1998, Black Panther’s creative team had been helmed by white men. To truly dive into Black Panther’s position as a time capsule of Black protest and power, we must consider who Black Panther becomes when written by Black men. *“Writers and story-tellers often think they are communicating one idea in their tales—and just as often learn that some of their audience read or heard the tale entirely different. The way they want to be read or hear things.”*

“With the sleekness of the Jungle Cat whose name he bears, T’Challa—King of Wakanda—stalks both the concrete city and the undergrowth of the veldt...”

1990s and Christopher Priest

The politically charged and socially relevant *Black Panther* books did not stop in the 1970s. During Don McGregor’s tenure, Marvel Comics would acquire a new editor, Gerry Conway. Conway disliked that many writers, McGregor included, were running their stories as if they were the editors themselves. McGregor was immediately dismissed from *Jungle Action*, the series itself would be cancelled, and Jack Kirby would take up writing and illustrating self-titled *Black Panther* books.³⁸ *Black Panther* would then be passed around from white writer to white writer until eventually, *Black Panther* was handed to a Black writer, Christopher Priest, in the late 1990s. Despite the potential in writing such an important character, Christopher Priest was less than enthused with the appointment and even upon reflection, considers writing *Black Panther* difficult.

In a 2015 interview, the Panther author reflects on his time writing the iconic Black character and when asked “[w]hat do you remember the most about that time in your life when you were doing *Black Panther*,” Priest recounted on “the constant uphill slog to woo fans of mainstream Marvel comics,” and that he “never had editorial or creative control over the book.” Priest also confessed that he “didn’t want to write a ‘black’ book because black characters are a tough sell.”³⁹

³⁸ Howe, *Marvel Comics*, 184

³⁹ Zack Smith, “PRIEST On BLACK PANTHER, Pt. 1: ‘Everyone Kind of Forgot Who PANTHER Was.’” Newsarama.com. August 10, 2015. Accessed Nov. 30, 2016. <http://www.newsarama.com/25496-priest-looks-back-at-black-panther.html>

He then goes on to explain how his “heart kind of sank” when he learned he would be taking over Black Panther because he “was concerned about being typecast as a ‘black’ writer, and really wasn’t thrilled about the character, even with the unique ‘Coming to America’ spin” the editorial team had come up with.⁴⁰ His solutions to these problems were first to insist that he got to write the character the way he wanted to, in a manner reminiscent of the original Stan Lee and Jack Kirby Panther, and second, to add a “point of view character: someone who could validate the fears and presumptions of white superhero fans who’d surely be reluctant to buy a ‘black’ book.”⁴¹ It begs us to ask the same question that Stuart Hall asked so many years: “What is this ‘Black’ in this Black Popular Culture?”⁴² Or to modify Hall: what is this Blackness that sells, who benefits from it, and then, is this truly a project of reclamation and redemption? In *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*, George Lipsitz details “the ways in which power, property and the politics of race in our society continue to contain unacknowledged and unacceptable allegiances to white supremacy.”⁴³ Our understanding of what has happened to Christopher Priest and the world that he clung to in his version of Black Panther can be enhanced by Lipsitz’s ideas. Priest says, “the most basic economic lesson this business

⁴⁰ “PRIEST On BLACK PANTHER, Pt. 1”

⁴¹ “PRIEST On BLACK PANTHER, Pt. 1”

⁴² Hall, “What is this ‘Black’ in Black Popular Culture?” *Social Justice*. Vol. 20. No. ½ Spring-Summer 1993)

⁴³ George Lipsitz, *The Possessive Investment in Whiteness*. Temple University Press: Philadelphia. 1998. Xviii.

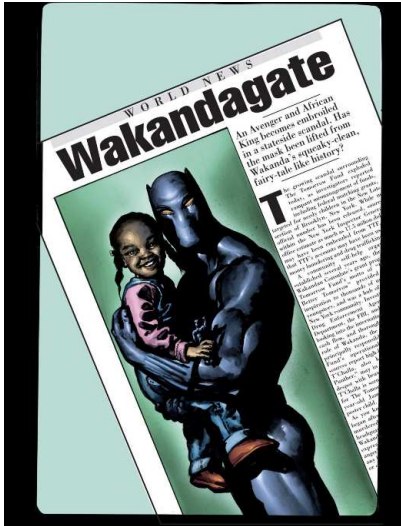


Figure 12 "Wakandagate" Black Panther #1, 1998

can teach you is minorities and female super heroes do not sell," and it is under this set of assumptions that the story of liberation that Black Panther supposedly promotes as a political satire is weakened by the affirmation of the hold of whiteness on the economic market of comics.⁴⁴ Priest's "political satire" included re-appropriating the Watergate scandal of 1972 (he would write about "Wakandagate" in

issue #1); references in issue #6 to the wildly divisive

Moynihan Report (1965), a document which would refer to the Negro family as a "tangle of pathology" and point to matrifocal family units as the source of this pathology; and the introduction of a Sistah Souljah inspired character, Queen Divine Justice, a homegrown intellectual, with strong views about race and policing that



Figure 13 Queen Divine Justice

she frequently shared with whomever was around.

Despite all of the challenges Priest faced during his tenure, his Panther books remain some of the most beloved renditions of the Black Panther character

⁴⁴ Priest in "The Story Thus Far," a short introduction in the back of the collected volume *Black Panther: The Complete Collection*. June 2001

by African-American male comic fanatics and scholars alike.⁴⁵ As previously mentioned, Priest's *Panther* reinvents the old mythos and takes T'Challa out of the jungle. Instead of solving mysteries in Wakanda as he did during much of *Jungle Action*, Christopher Priest's Black Panther prowled the streets of Harlem as a foreign dignitary, with self-deprecating Everett K. Ross, a young white man, acting as an American "attaché" or assistant of sorts to the Wakandan King while on American soil.

Priest's *Black Panther* books were graphically more modern compared to those of Lee and McGregor's tenures on the books—Black Panther was visually sleeker, shinier, fiercer, and drawn in a suit that was more streamlined and decorated with elements like long, golden claws designed to kill adversaries, rather only than outmaneuver them. Lee's and McGregor's books featured grainy artwork, which was more a result of the production methods of the time period than of the art itself, whereas several of the artists who illustrated Priest's issues could opt for a hyper-realistic version of the character.⁴⁶ Priest's gritty, cut-throat, dangerous Panther was a surprising turn for the character's evolution, but not as much when considering the evolution of graphic novels as whole during the 1990s. Just a few years before, in the mid- to late 1980s, graphic novel writers such as Alan Moore and Frank Miller would begin to popularize a new type of hyper-

⁴⁵ Jonathan Gayles, *White Scripts and Black Supermen: Black Masculinities in Comics*. (2012) Documentary. Many comic collectors, comic historians and scholars alike mention their enthusiasm for Priest's version.

⁴⁶ Quite a few artists took a stab at *Black Panther* during Priest's tenure and they all had different styles. Mike Manley's iteration is most different from the gritty, hyper realistic art utilized by most other *BP* artists. Manley would use bold lines and soft curves to create a look more reminiscent of a Saturday morning cartoon, which would change the tone of the books.

realistic, grim, and violent graphic novel, like *Watchmen* and *Batman: The Dark Knight Returns*. The success of these dark books no doubt had an impact on the presentation of Priest's stories.

This new tone was quite a shift for Black Panther the character, who went from stalking jungles to appearing out of the shadows of big city alleyways, in a manner that put him closer to Batman than an African King. (See Figure 14) Our



Figure 14 Black Panther appears out of the shadows, *Black Panther* #1, Nov 1998

first introduction to the formerly regal king is through a mug shot in issue 1 (See Figure 15), in which he is incidentally still wearing his mask and is identified as Black Panther, not as King T'Challa. The other leading Black characters are also shown as criminals,



Figure 15 Mugshots; *Black Panther* #1, Nov 1998

also appearing in mugshots. As a king, T'Challa should theoretically have diplomatic immunity but he chooses to be Black Panther, vigilante

hero of the night, instead of King T'Challa. In choosing to represent himself in this

identity, he is assigned the generalized, criminalized Black body in America. He is treated as everyone else is. America doesn't appear to take much interest in who Black Panther is under the mask. They take the presentation at face value. Perhaps T'Challa knows this and assumes that as he will be another Black body, that he may as well present himself as the anxiety provoking image he will be seen as.

Additionally, the cover of the first issue of the collection is jarring. The reader is accustomed to T'Challa in the jungles of Wakanda, which makes the image of him in the midst of an urban jungle forces the reader to reconsider him. Black Panther still rises above, he does in the cover of Don McGregor's iconic issue "T'Challa versus the Klan," bonding up buildings as if they are trees, showing that he is able to acclimate to new surroundings and adjust his skills accordingly.

The gold which adorns Black Panther on this first cover is a reminder of his wealth and status, though until Priest and artist of this cover, Mark Texeira, Black Panther's superiority was not marked by material signifiers. Until Priest, Black Panther was remarkable for his ingenuity. Howe reminds us that "out of costume, this Black Panther was an African prince...who led the fictional country of Wakanda not as Dark Continent noble savage but a scientific genius who impressed even the Fantastic Four's Reed Richards."⁴⁷ He was a trickster who reveled in experimentation and observation. Priest's Panther changes position from the observer to the observed, and observed for his physical presence rather than his mental capacity. This Black Panther is taciturn and brutal, setting store by violence

⁴⁷ Howe, *Marvel Comics*, 86.

rather than outsmarting, preferring to electrocute cars with people inside and lift them to the tops of buildings by their hair.⁴⁸

For added drama, and possibly to make up for the lack of time spent in Wakanda, Christopher Priest brings an entourage of Wakandans to Harlem to accompany T'Challa, including, most notably, two members of the Dora Milaje. These new characters were enigmatic, in particular because until Priest, Black Panther historically was either in a monogamous relationship with his African-American girlfriend, Monica Lynne, or single. On the one hand, they were proudly Black, female and physically intimidating: they served as the Black Panther's body guards. On the other, they were potential wives for the Wakandan King, and they were *children*. The fact that the Dora Milaje are but teenage girls at most is a running joke throughout several of the issues. Monica Lynne, Black Panther's one-time fiancée, who played a larger role in Don McGregor's comics of the 1970s, often refers to Nikia and Oyoke, the Dora Milaje, as "the children who used to run around the palace," and was more than once reduced to schoolgirl bickering over T'Challa with Nikia. T'Challa accidentally encourages Nikia into thinking he has chosen her as a potential wife early on in the series, thus Nikia comes to view his relationship with Monica Lynne as a threat to her potential future. Their squabbles become a petty, ongoing joke that starts with Monica telling Nikia, "Four words, Brandy, lay off the crack" and ends with Nikia ejecting Monica from a plane.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Priest, *Black Panther #1*, Nov 1998, 10-13.

⁴⁹ Christopher Priest, *Black Panther #11*, September 1999. This is a reference to the popular Brandy and Monica song of 1998, "The Boy Is Mine," in which the two girls squabble over a man.

Priest is credited with adding more visible Black female characters, but the characters that he did introduce had no hidden or otherwise feminist agenda: the Dora Milaje are under aged girls that are consistently sexualized; Monica Lynne, formerly occupied with helping T'Challa investigate the Klan in mid-century Georgia, is reduced to a damsel in distress, and Nikki, Everett K. Ross's superior, manages to complicate the story midway by revealing that she was romantically involved with both T'Challa and Everett, who had until that particular point, had become one of Black Panther's trusted advisors. Priest had no political aims with his stories, preferring instead to simply write a "good story"—meaning one that would sell. Even where race was concerned, he seemed willing to take his losses. In a letter from him in issue #12, he writes, "I hate to bring this up, but, yes I'm black....The MK folks have received some bizarre letters claiming that I couldn't possibly be black because I've made rib jokes and grits jokes and Fred Sanford jokes...Sure, it's a double standard: I get to make cracks about racial issues that a white writer would be strung up for, but that's not why I do it. Nobody sat me down and told me to make BLACK PANTHER about race. And it's not."⁵⁰

Priest's comments and interpretation of Black Panther shift the character's legacy. The king of Wakanda began with muddled origins, as Lee and Kirby fought to create a Black superhero their audiences could engage with, without having him explicitly represent and support the Black Power movement. Marvel would go so far as to attempt to rename Black Panther as "Black Leopard," to distance him from

⁵⁰ Priest, *Black Panther* #12, 1999.

“his politically charged namesakes.”⁵¹ In the books themselves, T’Challa would say to Ben Grimm on the subject of the Black Panther Party: “I neither condemn nor condone those who have taken up the name.”⁵² Don McGregor, fueled by a desire to see a Black hero stand on his own and be of political significance and relevance to African-American readers, would clarify Black Panther’s political stance once and for all by having the hero battle the Klan. Priest would replace McGregor’s Black Panther with a character through which he could personally explore African-American identity and stereotypes by resetting the books in Harlem. Filling his books with popular culture references and political jokes, Priest cut through the solemnity and seriousness of tone that McGregor previously brought to *Black Panther*. McGregor saw *Black Panther* as an opportunity to discuss race with a wide audience; Priest would instead poke at stereotypes, critiquing Black people in a self-deprecating way, using them to get a laugh from audiences.

Priest’s narrative shift would impact *Black Panther* story lines for the next decade and a half. Reginald Hudlin, another Black author, would use Priest’s *Panther* as a jumping off point for his own run in the early to mid-2000s. However, the introduction of essayist Ta-Nehisi Coates to the books would return Black Panther to the jungle, and closer to Don McGregor’s vision of Black hero.

2010s and Ta-Nehisi Coates

After Christopher Priest’s famous take on Black Panther, it was clear that T’Challa was a great symbol through which one could explore Black masculinity,

⁵¹ Howe, *Marvel Comics*, 133.

⁵² Howe, *Marvel Comics*, 133.

evolving social norms, and also the pressure to perform. Priest consistently battled the desire of many to write him off as a ‘Black’ writer, meaning that he only dealt with Black issues in his books, but also the desire to write something that Black people would find meaningful and relatable. Though Priest can be credited for expanding our knowledge of Wakanda by introducing the Dora Milaje as another stable of Wakandan culture, Ta-Nehisi Coates not only acknowledges the potential symbolism in Black Panther, but in Wakanda itself, turning to the country and its people to explore the comic’s tendency to produce political meaning.

Before Coates’ Black Panther, the comic wasn’t explicitly political, but various authors made the character engage with politically and socially important themes (most strikingly in Don MacGregor’s *T’Challa vs The Klan* story arc in the 1970s.) Yet, Coates’ intention with the series is to make it political, to make it challenging, and to make the concerns the books tackle relevant and urgent, in spite of the fictional universe in which they occur. He says outright that one of his main questions whilst tacking *Black Panther* is “Can a good man be a king, and would an advanced society tolerate a monarch?”⁵³ He goes on to say that research is relevant in order to know the legacy of comic writers who have worked on the character he now must represent, “but it also pulls from the very real history of society—from the pre-colonial era of Africa, the peasant rebellions that wracked Europe toward the end of the Middle Ages, the American Civil War, the Arab Spring, and the rise of ISIS.”⁵⁴

⁵³ Ta-Nehisi Coates, “The Return of the Black Panther,” *The Atlantic*. April 2016. Accessed July 30, 2017. (<https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-return-of-the-black-panther/471516/>)

⁵⁴ Coates, “Return of Black Panther,” *Atlantic*.

Coates makes this Panther socially relevant by outright saying he's political, overtly stating that he's creating a type of allegory and sparking the conversation in his letters pages.⁵⁵ He encourages critical thought, combats threats to progressive thought, and facilitates exchanges of ideas between readers rather than launching into a counter attack. One example of this is how one reader's concerns about LGBTQ representation in Coates' *Black Panther* is addressed. Reader Christopher Jeter states:

*"I will concede to the notion that [previous depictions of Africa in Black Panther] may have only seemed like an authentic African stance, but the feeling of LGBTQ themes and people being out of place in a BLACK PANTHER book is by no means unfounded. It is well known how African countries as a whole feel toward LGBTQ people. So the idea that a comic book about an African country like Wakanda (albeit fictional) would be pushing LGBTQ themes and people, is more than just contrived; it is blatant disrespect to the lore of Black Panther."*⁵⁶ (see figure 12)

⁵⁵ In response to a letter from astute reader Lucius Couloute in issue #4 in which he notes some of the potential references Coates may have hidden in the story, Coates says, "Yep! The allusions are not a mistake. The book does have a lot to say about race, class, and gender, but (perhaps with the exception of gender) it is doing that almost as allegory. All three of those categories are ultimately about power: who wields it and how. That's one of the larger themes of BLACK PANTHER this season." (Coates, *Black Panther*, volume 1, number 4; Marvel Comics, 2016.)

⁵⁶ Coates, *Black Panther*, volume 1, issue 12. Marvel Comics: 2016.

Coates briefly responds to Jeter by saying, “I admit I’m a little mystified as to why,

I have been through the BLACK PANTHER books from Jack Kirby’s run through to Ta-Nehisi Coates’ run now, and although I think Christopher Priest’s version is the best, I still had problems with some of the things he tried (like the whole Kasper Cole phase). However, aside from the Kasper Cole thing, it never felt like I was reading something that was not organic to the Black Panther mythos. It always seemed to fit with what I assume many believe to be an African stance on issues brought up in the books, and that stance almost always seemed an authentic “African” stance. I will concede to the notion that it may have only seemed like an authentic African stance, but the feeling of LGBTQ themes and people being out of place in a BLACK PANTHER book is by no means unfounded. It is well known how African countries as a whole feel toward LGBTQ people. So the idea that a comic book about an African country like Wakanda (albeit fictional) would be pushing LGBTQ themes and people, is more than just contrived; it is blatant disrespect to the lore of Black Panther.

The only analogy I can think of that can accurately describe how ridiculous it is to push LGBTQ themes and people in a BLACK PANTHER book, is to ask you to try and picture Black Power themes being pushed in Thor’s books. It is not that, for example, Black Power themes being pushed are ridiculous, it is the idea that you would try and push them in Asgard (THOR books) that takes things from an attempt at trying something different to a clear case of martyring, and in the case of the BLACK PANTHER books, not even for the core constituents of the books, neither for the mythos nor the lore of the books. What I am trying to say is having a character like Jennifer Walters (She-Hulk) fall when you brought in a writer who was a lawyer (Jennifer Walters was a lawyer) to write on the book might not have brought in the big bucks, but it was faithful to the lore of She-Hulk. I can respect that.

What you have done to Wakanda in the all-new BLACK PANTHER title, in reference to the LGBTQ themes, I cannot respect. The designs, color schemes, heck, generally everything else was pretty good. I do not mean to gloss over them because they were clearly done with great thought and care. I mean, the artist Brian Stelfreeze stated he pulled from cultures all over the continent (Africa) to establish the look of Wakandans, including Masi tribesmen, ancient Zulu warriors, and even modern Kalashnikov-wielding rebels, and that hard work paid off because the artwork looks amazing. However, I will not be reading any more of the all-new BLACK PANTHER title because of the LGBTQ themes. As I said previously, it is beyond contrived; it is blatant disrespect to the mythos of Black Panther.

Marvel fan,
Christopher Jeter

Hi, Christopher. Thanks for writing in. I love Kirby and Priest, too. But I admit I’m a little mystified as to why, say, time-traveling frogs are authentically African and a lesbian couple is not. Either way, I respect your right to vote with your dollar. At least I’m saving you a little bit of coin.

However, in reading the letters page, there was a note of discord, which was the impetus of this letter (the first I have ever written to a comic book company in 40-plus years of collecting). The submitter was, shall we say, “less than enthused” with the inclusion of LGBTQ themes in the Black Panther mythos. As a matter of fact, the aforementioned submitter said “It is blatant disrespect to the lore of Black Panther.” I would most strenuously disagree.

His statement was that “It is well-known how African countries as a whole feel towards LGBTQ people.” I agree, but you don’t need to travel beyond the borders of North America to see that level of animosity. It exists in all its forms right here at home. You can pick up a paper any day of the week and read about it—but we as a society are changing. Painfully, slowly and with great reticence in some quarters, but we are changing for the better. This is in no way a bad thing.

Now I respectfully submit that having LGBTQ relationships is entirely needed in the lore of Black Panther. Why? Simply put, it has been stated over and over that this is the most advanced country on the planet, both in technology and society. Why then would they ostracize certain groups? As Mr. Coates is taking great pains to show, Wakanda is about progress, about inclusion, about healing and moving forward, inclusive of everyone in society. I believe that dovetails exactly with the ideals of acceptance, tolerance and empathy.

But hey, I’m an old guy stuck in his ways.

Once again, thanks to all the people making BLACK PANTHER. I thank you for your creation of a wonderful piece of comic book lore.

Kindest Regards,
Norm Duguid

Hey, Norm. First off, thanks for sticking with the book. I knew it would be a bit of a learning curve for BLACK PANTHER and it has been one. So thanks for sticking through it. I knew the question of gender and sexual identity would be divisive, but—to be blunt—I just don’t much care. You’re correct that one need not leave North America to see homophobia, but

say, time-traveling frogs are authentically African and a lesbian couple is not.”⁵⁷

Instead of fighting such a battle at length, Coates makes a strategic move and allows for a well-written counter point to be published in the letters pages of the following issue. In issue 13, a letter from reader Norm Duguid reads:

“Now I respectfully

submit that having LGBTQ relationships is entirely needed in the lore of Black Panther.

Why?... As Mr. Coates is taking great pains to show, Wakanda is about progress, about

⁵⁷ Coates, *Black Panther*, volume 1, issue 12. Marvel Comics: 2016

inclusion, about healing and moving forward, inclusive of everyone in society. I believe that dovetails exactly with the ideals of acceptance, tolerance and empathy.”⁵⁸ Coates identifies intellectual dialogue between members of society is part of the narrative of progress. He does his best to show his own ideals in the work itself, by being transparent about his intentions and encouraging different people to share their perspectives. Yet, this is all the work that he does outside of the books, and it is worth discussing how Coates politicizes the content. Coates’ take on the iconic hero returns Black Panther to the jungles of Wakanda, but, as Coates mentions in his *Atlantic* article on the making of this run, he more interested in T’Challa’s role as a king. T’Challa thus becomes a symbol through which Coates may inspect how and if political systems such as monarchies can coexist with technologically advanced societies. Coates’ thematic take on Black Panther impressed upon the reader on the very first page of the first issue. Artist Brian Stelfreeze depicts bloodied and bowed Black Panther before visions of different people who represent his various failures in regard to his country—his father, T’Chaka, appears to

⁵⁸ Coates, *Black Panther*, volume 1, issue 13. Marvel Comics: 2016

express his disappointment; Namor, ruler of Atlantis and an anti-hero with whom T'Challa had alliances, tells the reader the Panther has been cast out and isolated; and finally, a member of the Dora Milaje, tells the Black Panther that he “has lost his way.”⁵⁹



Figure 17 Coates, *Black Panther* #1, 2016, page 1

Visually, the artist shows us that Wakanda and the ancestors have turned their backs, not necessarily on Black Panther, but on T'Challa, the man beneath the mask. From page one, there is something symbolic about the mantle of Black Panther that inspires hope and loyalty in the people of Wakanda, something in the legacy that gives whomever inhabits it strength, and encourages a begrudging respect from enemies. In the first page, we learn that T'Challa's reign as the Black Panther, is not inspiring this effect—in fact, he

is doing the opposite, succumbing to the negativity that plagued his tenure. The reader discovers that this story is not simply a jungle adventure story with a smattering of

⁵⁹ There was a wonderful article in *Vulture* in which Ta-Nehisi Coates annotates the first issue of his *Black Panther* run: Reisman, Abraham. “Ta-Nehisi Coates Annotates His *Black Panther* Debut.” *Vulture*, 6 Apr. 2016, 9:14, www.vulture.com/2016/04/ta-nehisi-coates-black-panther-annotated.html.

extravagant villains and murder mysteries, but the story of a man whose presence is to inspire meaning while he is searching for meaning on his own. Coates' Panther shows us



Figure 18 Changamire in his library, Issue #4, 2016, p. 8

how the political is conveyed on the individual level, between king and subjects, king and colleagues, and subjects with each other.

As Coates writes more and more issues, one can see that his political agenda is anything but subtle. The Jeter/Duguid exchange is but one example of readers engaging with Coates's political messages and intellectual "Easter eggs."⁶⁰ In the letters pages of issue 6, reader Eli Boonin-Vail comments on the mix of books that adorn the comic's leader philosopher, Changamire's, library. Changamire's library is a visual depiction of the plethora of influences that Coates is drawing from in this particular rendition of Wakanda. (See figure 14.) Revolutionary philosopher Franz Fanon's work *The Wretched of the Earth* makes a headlining appearance, with Eric Williams' *Capitalism and Slavery* sharing the spotlight to the right of Changamire's silhouette in the panel above. *A Nation Under Our Feet*, the Pulitzer Prize historical winning work of Steven Hahn rounds out

⁶⁰ "Easter eggs" in media "are digital objects, messages, or interactions built into computer programs by their designers. They are intended as a surprise to be found by the user, but they are not required in order to use the program." [Laine Nooney, "Easter Eggs" in *The John Hopkins guide to digital media* eds. Marie-Laure Ryan, Lori Emerson, and Benjamin J. Robertson. Johns Hopkins University Press: 2014 (165).]

the political literary influences, showing that both Coates and his main thinker, are deeply interested in power struggles, their results and the social impacts that follows. Both Coates and Changamire draw inspiration from fictional literary works which explore identity, citizenship and the multitudes of overlapping and different facets of Blackness, such as Chimamanda Adichie Ngozi's *Americanah* and what might, perhaps, be *Citizen* by Claudia Rankine. Coates blatantly uses and engages with the literature, political theory, sociology, psychology, history and myth of the African Diaspora, and thus urges his readers to as well. In this way, Coates' *Panther* becomes a case study of Black people in the West.

This additional layering of political meaning does not just make an appearance on Changamire's shelves, but in the narration, the struggles that T'Challa faces, the conversations he has with his political advisors, the discontent of his people, the addition of poetry and references to songs. Coates even finds a veiled way to reference Audre Lorde by introducing "The Parable of Zami" in issue 9, in which the Midnight Angels tell us is "A free house is not built with a slave driver's tools," an homage to Lorde's seminal essay, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House."⁶¹

⁶¹ Audre Lorde, "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House." (1979) <http://www.historyisaweapon.com/defcon1/lordedismantle.html>. "Zami," incidentally, is also the title of her "biomythography," *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*.

Coates is dedicated to a Panther story that is deeply meaningful on several levels, but he understands and accepts the difficulty that has come with such an approach. On the one hand, he takes personal responsibility for the difficulty and density of the first few issues, explaining that this is in part from his being a novice to the form of a graphic novel.⁶² On the other, he refuses to apologize for its intellectual rigor. A young reader, Khalid, explains in a letter that he “was a little lost by the first issue” and had to reread them a few times in order to garner the meaning, to which Coates responds simply that he’s glad Khalid is sticking with it. (See figure 19.) He also mentions that this type of book was something he craved as a kid, but it’s worth mentioning that Coates, based on his memoir, *The Beautiful Struggle*, was a rather precocious young person, and had more access than most to political thinking based on his father’s job at a research center at

Hi there! I just want to say, I am really loving your BLACK PANTHER series! I'm 12 years old, and a friend of mine showed me an ad for the series and now I'm completely hooked! I gotta say, I was a little lost by the first issue but when I read the second and third (and re-read them), it all came together. I love the different story lines that are going on here. I first learned of the Black Panther in a Fantastic Four comic--he seemed very interesting and all the strife in Wakanda really brings out the cool side of him. It reminds me of a line from CIVIL WAR: "An empire toppled by its enemies can rise again, but one that crumbles from within--that's dead." Epic.

Reading your letters page, I can see how much this comic brings different people together and I felt that I had to write in to let you know what a good job you're doing with this character. Keep up the awesome work!

Khalid

Hi Khalid! So happy to hear from you. This is the book I wanted to read when I was your age, and I guess the one I still want to read today. Kids like you are the future of comic books. Glad you're sticking with it.

Figure 19 Coates engaging with young reader, Khalid

Howard University, a historically Black university, and his father’s former membership in the Black Panther Party. Both Howard and the Black Panther Party had enormous impact on Black political thought since Howard’s foundation in the second half of the nineteenth-century and the Panthers’ creation in the 1960s. This access

⁶² Coates, *Black Panther*, issue 12. In the letters pages, he admits, “I can imagine the earlier comics could be a bit challenging. I was new to the form. But I wanted to do a lot in that form.”

coupled with an unquenchable desire to ingest words for their knowledge, places Coates in a stratum of intellectual privilege that most people are not afforded.⁶³

Coates was raised by a man with an FBI file for his involvement in grassroots community-based organization whose primary goal was to uplift the Black community and actively fight for their rights, and out of that background, he developed an ability to ask questions that strike to the very heart of any issue, a skill that would serve him well as a journalist.⁶⁴ When it comes to writing, intentionality is a principle by which Coates lives.

If we take this principle of intentionality to Coates' *Black Panther* run, we can read it as allegorical, and if we do many themes occur. Coates' *Panther* investigates the feeling of disenchantment with authority on the part of the people, a feeling of disconnect between the people and the gods, counter revolutions, and the wrong people having the power to control hearts and minds. There is a strong message of unification across the Diaspora with the introduction of the (new) Crew, which is reminiscent of Pan-Africanism. The power of technological communication as a method of revolting and the use of it in rebellion and counter revolutions, which equates a lot to social media movements we are seeing today.

Coates' *Panther* also places Black women at the center of the Wakandan Revolution. Though Christopher Priest is most responsible for adding important female

⁶³ Ta-Nehisi Coates, *The Beautiful Struggle*. New York: 2008. P. 26

⁶⁴ Coates is also responsible for some of the most poignant critical essays our time, for example, "The Case for Reparations."

Ta-Nehisi Coates, "The Case for Reparations." *Atlantic*. June 2014

<http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/06/the-case-for-reparations/361631/>

figures to *Black Panther*'s character roster (i.e. the Dora Milaje), Coates writes women characters with political purpose. The revolution quite directly appears on the backs of Black women. When members of the Dora Milaje, Ayo and Aneka, "go rogue," it was a result of a break with T'Challa the King, as they no longer believed that his regime was adequately protecting the citizens of Wakanda. Female citizens of Wakanda were subject to sexual and physical assault, and as we learn in issue 1, Aneka and Ayo become traitors when they opt to protect those women instead of watching the harassment occur.⁶⁵ The Dora Milaje thus become true protectors of the legacy of Wakanda, a role that shifts from being a protector of the King to a protector of the people.

The women of King T'Challa's family also move to the forefront. The "Mother-Queen" Ramonda, T'Challa's step-mother, is one of T'Challa's trusted advisors, consulting him on matters of the monarchy and guiding him in a journey towards self-discovery. It is Ramonda who explains to T'Challa that the true problem lies in the hearts of the people and their discontent with the system.⁶⁶ Just as Ramonda becomes the bridge between T'Challa and his understanding of his people, his sister and former Black Panther, Shuri, becomes a bridge through which T'Challa may access the teachings of the ancestors and use them to make attempts to move forward. When T'Challa finally rescues Shuri, who was previously trapped in the Djalia, or the plane of ancient memory, she returns to Wakanda in the role of the "Aja-Adanna," which means "the Ancient Future."⁶⁷ All of the women in Coates' imagining of Wakanda have deep political

⁶⁵ Coates, *Black Panther*, issue 1. (2016)

⁶⁶ Coates, *Black Panther*, issue 4. (2016)

⁶⁷ Coates, *Black Panther*, issues 10-11. (2016)

importance and represent a potential to explore the new function of Black women in *Black Panther* comics.⁶⁸



Figure 20 Black Panther and his team are joined by the ancestors

Shuri's spiritual connection provides a solution to the problems of the first story arc in Coates' *Panther*. There is a deep respect for the ancestors and those who came before us in the text. We see this in the final battle, quite literally, as it is not the gods, but the spirits of Black Panthers before T'Challa and the spirits of loyal soldiers who appear alongside the current Black Panther and Shuri. (See figure left.) But we also see this reverence figuratively in Changamire's library: his collection of philosophers and political texts indicates the necessity of learning what the greatest have discovered before us, so that we may move forward as a culture.

Conclusion

***"The questions, ultimately, are more necessary than the answers."*⁶⁹**

Among the many relevant elements that Coates brings to light in his *Panther*, one of the most important, for the purposes of this paper, may be the role of the academic. Several potential enemies of the state are identified throughout of the course of Coates' books, but it is Changamire the philosopher, who, at first, is identified as the most

⁶⁸ The role of Black women in *Black Panther* would be an excellent opportunity to do a new reading of Black female identity in literature. Unfortunately, neither time nor space allow for such an analysis to take place here.

⁶⁹ Coates, "Return of Black Panther," *Atlantic*.

dangerous. He is thought to be teaching his students dangerous, rebellious philosophies. Tetu, however, one of the leaders of a group of discontent citizens known as “The People,” says to the teacher, “Staying here, shut up in thought and abstraction—that is unconscionable. How long will they plunder our people while we stand aside and look?”⁷⁰ What Tetu alludes to here, using a reference from Bob Marley’s “Redemption Song,” is a concept familiar to all scholars who seek to change establishments with their work and enact social justice: The Ivory Tower. Academics can sometimes feel powerless or as though they are being rendered powerless in situations of active rebellion, even though the work that they do involves the study of social movements, historical justice, or giving voice to the voiceless.

Though the issue is mostly discussed through Changamire, it might possibly be a moment of self-reflection for Coates himself, his work and his privileged position in the Academy, which results in a certain distance between the problems experienced and our ability to and the way we talk about those societal problems. This project began as an interest in Black Panther’s ability to be a symbol for Black millennials in the age of #BlackLivesMatters. This interest only expanded and evolved when I learned that though Black Panther was created in 1966 in the midst of the Civil Rights Movement and the beginning of the Black Panther Party, but the character wasn’t immediately used for political capital. In the time between T’Challa’s complex beginnings as a suspicious leader of a fantastic nation and his current depiction of a good man trying to navigate the difficulty to being a good king while retaining his humanity, one thing is certain: even if

⁷⁰ Coates, *Black Panther*, issue 2. (2016)

writers were not always purposefully making Marvel's first Black hero political, the readers certainly found meaning in T'Challa.

There was a reason that Black millennials found a hero in Black Panther, a reason for the explosive reaction to the impending Black Panther movie slated to premiere in February 2018, directed by Ryan Coogler, a Black film maker best known for *Fruitvale Station*, a biopic of the last day in a man's life before being killed by the police. There is a reason that Marvel allowed one of the most critically acclaimed social commentators on the current state of Black America to write *Black Panther* and that all of these changes occur simultaneously with the #BlackLivesMatter movement. As with police brutality, as with protests, as with turning to our great leaders in times of trouble, Black youth are realizing that none of these things are new occurrences, but rather new iterations of a long, complicated lineage which are all a part of the history of Black people, not only in America, but in the world. The film *Black Panther* that we eagerly await is not a new hero, but a Black hero who has been fighting various political battles since his inception, regardless of whether or not we were aware of them.

In this instance, the work of the Ivory Tower is not mutually exclusive from the political movement happening around us. Grounding Black Panther in a historical legacy gives the character and Wakanda even more symbolic power. As with anything else, it is best not to unconditionally accept Black Panther as the hero of Black America, but to also understand that everything comes with a complex story—nothing is as it seems, no matter how simple a story it appears to be.

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Incognegro:
The Creation and Deconstruction of Black Identity in the “Safety” of Harlem

Incognegro, despite its graphic novel form and 2006 publication date, invokes many of the same themes that occupied writers of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s and 1930s, including, but not limited to: passing, identity as a Black person in America and self-identification outside of race. Author Mat Johnson and artist Warren Pleece offer the reader a thrilling tale about what it is like to live within and without the cracks in the “Color Line,” by quite literally removing color from the text and exploring what ensues. I argue that the removal of color allows for identities to become masks within the text—masks that the different characters may slip on and remove, take from others or force on to them.

In the Author’s Note at the start of the text, Mat Johnson writes a succinct memoir that led to the creation of *Incognegro*:

“I grew up a black boy who looked white....I started fantasizing about living in another time, another situation where my ethnic appearance would be an asset instead of a burden. We would ‘go Incognegro,’ we told ourselves as we ran around, pretending to be race spies in the war against white supremacy...”⁷¹

Johnson writes that he was inspired by the life story of former head of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Walter White, a Black man encased in a white skin. Walter White’s life bears remarkable similarity to both Johnson and Johnson’s protagonist, Zane: White was fair skinned, with blond hair and blue eyes but aligned himself with his African-American heritage. He used writing as one method to fight for racial equality; and his intellectual thought was greatly influenced by

⁷¹ Johnson, Mat and Warren Pleece. *Incognegro: A Graphic Mystery*. New York: DC Comics. 2008. Author’s Note

his white skin. Nevertheless, through his work with the NAACP and his writings and White was able to articulate his concerns surrounding his paradox of identity safety of a multicultural and constantly in flux Harlem.⁷² Influenced by these aspects of White's life, Johnson settled on the idea that the early twentieth century America—Harlem, specifically—would be a time and place where his personal ethnic appearance and his ability to change identity at will would be celebrated.

This paper is an analysis of the slippery nature of American Black identity—how the Black (and white) male (and female) characters of *Incognegro* make a playground of identity, transforming it, moving within and without it, at their leisure. The characters' slippages prove that if the Color Line is so easy to manipulate, did Negro people with white skin, such as Walter White, constitute a Negro identity? Surrounding this question is Johnson's choice to place this particular racial thought experiment in 1930s Harlem. What about the Harlem Renaissance enabled and empowered writers of the period through to the next century to stretch and explore the boundaries of this so-called "Blackness?"

Harlem

Author Mat Johnson, born August 19, 1970 in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, is two generations and a state away from the time and place that he chose as the setting for his novel. While the Harlem Renaissance seems ideally a time which identity exploration and discovery was abundant and encouraged, particularly through art, scholar Nathan Irvine Huggins reminds us in *Harlem Renaissance* that "even if Harlem blacks had wanted it,

⁷² Johnson was likely most heavily influenced by Walter White's autobiography, *A Man Called White*, in which he discusses at length both his work in the NAACP but also his marriage to a white woman, a choice which added to his inner turmoil about the mismatch between his identity and his skin. (Walter Francis White, *A Man Called White*. Viking, 1948.)

there was little chance that they would have been left alone to shape and define their own identities.”⁷³ Blacks during the Harlem Renaissance were heavily surveilled. They were watched by their white peers who envied and often tried to imitate or take part in the goings on of Harlem Blacks. Huggins aptly describes the sensation:

*“It was a cheap trip. No safari! Daylight and a taxi ride rediscovered New York City, no tropic jungle. There had been thrill without danger. For these black savages were civilized...they would not run amok.”*⁷⁴

Harlem Blacks were watched by white patrons, who eagerly awaited the opportunity to support unknown Black artists—granted they produced the type of art that the white patrons considered to be “Black.” As Huggins explains “[s]adly, all of Harlem—especially the entertainer, the artist, and the writer—was in some way, at one time or another obliged to the white patron.”⁷⁵ These sometimes positive, but always constraining relationships, were a burden and posed a dilemma for the Black artist: either write what is in one’s heart and risk losing the (often only) source of income, or write what pleases the white patronage and secure support.⁷⁶

The federally funded Federal Arts Program was proof that the United States government saw the artistic currents happenings Harlem, which meant the goings on of Harlem were under its watchful eagle eye, too. While many of the social and political reckonings were happening in between the lines of Langston Hughes’ and Claude McKay’s poems or within the pages of Wallace Thurman or Zora Neale Hurston’s longer prose, outright political action was not absent from Harlem. In the same period, W.E.B. DuBois would become editor of NAACP magazine, *The Crisis*, in which his editorials

⁷³Huggins, ebook chapter 3, loc 1536

⁷⁴ Huggins, ebook chapter 3, loc 1536

⁷⁵ Huggins, chapter 3, loc 2087;

⁷⁶ This concept is explored in greater detail in Langston Hughes’ seminal essay, “The Negro Artist and the Racial Mountain.”

positioned him as a radical, outspoken race man with little patience for white people—or fools of any race.⁷⁷ Such action was hardly ignored by the government—for it was these forerunners of the Civil Rights Era activists who would fight for the *Brown v. Board* decision—something that had been decades in the making well before the final decision in 1954.

Nevertheless, despite the surveillance and the constant political constraints, as Johnson notes, the writers of the Harlem did benefit from a certain artistic liberty, as African-Americans had more artistic land to explore than ever before. Renaissance writers took pleasure in navigating the endless variations of Blackness. Jean Toomer and Claude McKay filled their works with explicit descriptions of the varying hues of Black skin. Langston Hughes often battled with himself to understand what it meant to be Black and have white blood, a point most poignantly discussed in his short poem, “Cross.”⁷⁸ And Nella Larsen pushed boundaries pushed the boundaries of Black identity even further, writing two short novels featuring white looking Black women, who reckon with their identities through their ability and decisions to either pass or “not pass.” Like Johnson, Larsen also grappled to come to terms with her Black American identity, being

⁷⁷ Huggins, chapter 1, loc 602;

⁷⁸ “My old man’s a white old man
And my old mother’s black.
If ever I cursed my white old man
I take my curses back.
If ever I cured my black old mother
And wished she were in hell,
I’m sorry for that evil wish
And now I wish her well.
My old man died in a fine big house.
My ma died in a shack.
I wonder where I’m going to die,
Being neither white nor black?”

foreign on both sides as she was Nordic on her mother's side and West Indian on her father's.

There was some safety felt by both Larsen as a contemporary Harlem Renaissance writer, and Johnson, an early twenty-first century writer, in which they were able to explore identity and traverse the color line and highlight types of Blackness that otherwise would have fallen on the periphery. Scholar Tim Caron notes the literary lineage Johnson places himself within, saying, "Following in the line of such black literary ancestors (as Ralph Ellison might use the term) as James Weldon Johnson, Walter White, and Nella Larsen, Mat Johnson tells the story of young, ambitious, light-complexioned African American male, Zane Pinchback, who lives in Harlem during the 1930s."⁷⁹ Zane Pinchback, Johnson's protagonist, is a reporter for *New Holland Herald*. He has his own column, *Incognegro*, in which he reports the stories of lynching and racial violence that he obtains by literally going "incognegro"—passing for a white man during these incidents to get the inside scoop. His latest assignment sends him to Mississippi to save his brother, Alonzo, also known as Pinchy, who has been convicted of the murder of a local white woman. The story that unfolds is further complicated when Zane's explosive and impulsive friend Carl tags along as Zane travels south, the local Klansmen prove to already be suspicious of Zane's identity and no one's identity is truly what it seems—everyone has more than one identity, each more dangerous than the last.

The characters that inhabit Johnson's fictive world almost take pleasure in their ingenuity for creating and donning masks, for behind these masks and performances, no

⁷⁹ Caron, Tim. "'Black and White and Read All Over: Representing Race in Mat Johnson and Warren Pleece's *Incognegro: A Graphic Mystery*'" in *Comics and the U.S. South*, ed. Brannon Costello and Quiana J. Whitted, 143.

one is able to recognize them. The inability for society at large to concretely identify the characters based on outward characteristics affords them greater mobility both figuratively and literally.

A prime example of this increased mobility occurs near the beginning of the graphic novel when Zane Pinchback and his friend, Carl, board a train destined for Mississippi. As the train pulls away from its station in Harlem, Zane cordially engages a white passenger in conversation. As the train slides easily in and out of new geographic locations, Zane casually transitions from his identity as a Harlem Black man, into an ambiguous Southern bound white man. Carl, who has followed Zane along on his adventure, proves that he too is able to move deftly into another identity as well. The two “disguised” men are coded as white by their white fellow passenger, until Carl reacts violently to their companion saying,

“I think what you are referring to is the type of nigras they got up here in the north. They’re uppity, don’t know their place. It’s sad, really. The carpet-baggers don’t love their nigras like we do down home. They neglect them. They let them grow wild. If I had the time and energy, I’d take my cat of nine right up there to Harlem and whip some sense into those zip coons for their own—”⁸⁰

⁸⁰ Johnson, 20

In the panel that follows, Carl's outburst is emphasized by Pleece's illustration of his face. In the previous page, Carl's facial features are constructed by small touches of Black lines, leaving as much untouched white space in the face as possible. Carl's outburst is accompanied by a quite different illustration of his face. This time, more lines appear—they are darker, more severe and leave a shadow across his face. (See figure 21 below.)



Figure 21 Carl's outburst (21)

First, we must consider the significance of the black and white color scheme in articulating the fluidity of identity. Based on comic theorist, Scott McCloud's, work, the reader may take the lack of color, the lines and the affective level of these artistic decisions of the panels to be tell a greater story than what we may normally take at face value. Indeed, in the introduction to *Black Comics: Politics of Race and Representation* helps us understand the value of words plus art: "The point of any comics, whether it is a comic strip, graphic novel, or single panel strip, is to entertain audiences and *also to*

provoke thinking about the latent meanings.”⁸¹ The “latent meaning” of Johnson’s words is underscored by Pleece’s black and white art work. McCloud tells us that “in black and white, the ideas *behind* the art are communicated more directly. Meaning transcends form. Art approaches language.”⁸² McCloud goes on to say that flat color adds a certain reality to comics, making them seem more realistic to readers.⁸³ Because publishing comics in color is more accessible these days than in the early years of comic publishing, the reader must infer that Pleece’s decision to illustrate this particular graphic novel in black and white was intentional. As McCloud says, in black and white, the ideas are clearer. *Incognegro* is a text about life, yes, but it is about the abstract ideas about race and color which have very vivid and real consequences, ideas which grapple with the idea of racial definition based on traits that are visible.

The intentionality behind the black and white is also important in more obvious ways. The lack of color turns everything into mild chaos. In the essay on *Incognegro*, Tim Caron writes: “In ‘erasing’ color from their text, Johnson and Pleece seek not to eradicate racial categories but to wrestle with the racialized representations of African Americans in the comics medium—for to place a word, a concept, or a literary text ‘under erasure’ is to actually draw attention to it, forcing us wrestle with an abiding absence.”⁸⁴ Without physical attributes to categorize and identify the various characters, they in turn get confused. One must *think* to decipher which character is which. When the

⁸¹ Howard & Jackson, 5; I have added italics for emphasis

⁸² McCloud, 192

⁸³ McCloud 192

⁸⁴ Caron, Tim. “‘Black and White and Read All Over:’ Representing Race in Mat Johnson and Warren Pleece’s *Incognegro: A Graphic Mystery*” in *Comics and the U.S. South*, eds. Brannon Costello and Qiana J. Whitted. Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2012. 139

physical markers are removed, the reader must pay attention to the more abstract (read: more difficult to discern) characteristics of the characters to identify them. Zane and Carl, for instance, are so similarly dressed, in long traveling cloaks and hats, that it is important to note their personality traits in order to tell them apart. Instead of being able to identify Carl as, say, the darker of the pair of light skinned men, we are forced to identify him as the quick tempered, opinionated stowaway, who prides himself on being able to fool others into believing false identities he has created for himself.

This visceral confusion of the color line draws attention to the absurdity of race based prejudice. In *erasing* color from the text, Pleece cunningly rids the reader of any belief that there are any other characteristics, physical attributes that are the tell-tale sign of a Negro. Indeed, save the title of the book, Zane's confession of being a Negro, and perhaps Zane's outburst, it would be difficult to tell if any of the main characters were Black. As McCloud reminds us, black and white is the style of choice for those attempting to clearly articulate ideas: the importance of race, therefore, becomes the stuff of abstraction.

On an affective level, McCloud also introduces the idea that emotions can be made visible in comics. He tells us that "the idea that a picture can evoke an emotional or sensual response in the viewer is vital to the art of comics."⁸⁵ This synesthesia draws attention to the use of more than one sense to evoke certain responses. This idea, which dates back to impressionism, is the basis of artists using all of their arsenal to represent their world as they experience it. Mat Johnson subscribes to this in *Incognegro*: he begins his story by using words to explain the urgency with which he had to investigate the

⁸⁵ McCloud 118-121

discomfort and multi-faceted paradox that was his own identity. Johnson explains to the reader that the disconnect between what his outward appearance was and who he felt he was at his core confused his relationship to the world around him. Caron reminds us that Johnson's relationship to race has been even further complicated by his children: "The birth of his twins in 2005 provided further impetus for the book's emphasis upon external racial signifiers. Like the brothers in *Incognegro*, Johnson describes his own children in his 'Author's Note' as 'two people with the exact same ethnic lineage destined to be viewed differently only because of genetic randomness,' words that could just as easily describe the twin brothers of *Incognegro*, Zane and Alonzo Pinchback."⁸⁶ This anxiety led to an immediate need to alleviate the feeling—using his imagination to transform his malaise to an asset. Johnson needs more than words to communicate the complexity of his identity, the depth of feeling it inspires, and the interpersonal challenges such an identity begets.

In *Incognegro*, the art work highlights Zane's nebulous identity as a strength in the very lines that make up each individual panel. Pleece creates his characters using bold lines that are honest and true. Except where they are jagged for angry emphasis or broken to relay emotional distress, Zane's face, when shown, is comprised of a variety of bold, strong strokes, signaling a feeling of solidity and contentment overall in oneself. If, however, Johnson's story were more about racial ambiguity as a source of individual anxiety and trauma, the pages would look quite different; Pleece would have likely

⁸⁶ Caron, "Representing Race in *Incognegro*: A Graphic Mystery," 144

chosen a different variety of lines which represented instability and anxiety in the face of Johnson's slippery characters.⁸⁷

Between Pleece's art which inspires and communicates an unprecedented level of depth and Johnson's personal narrative, which adds emotional complexity to it all, one would believe that is the extent one could gather from this configuration of words and images. However, Johnson cleverly places this narrative in an important and complicated historical *and* literary context. Johnson projects his personal identity crisis into an era in which complicated racial identity was common and a pet project for most serious writers of the Harlem Renaissance.

Identity Crisis of the (Incog)Negro

All identity, whether Black or white, male or female, or even personal identity, is all fair game in *Incogengro*. Identities are passed around, traded, forced, and escaped and all of the identities, are layered with several meanings. As Zane aptly tells his brother once they've escaped the dangers of the "southern horrors," "Identity is open-ended. Why have just one?"⁸⁸ (See figure 22 below.)



Figure 22 *Identity is open-ended* (129)

The word "incogengro" has several meanings, if we restrict our analysis to those referenced in the text. "Incogengro" is a special, revered ability and responsibility, reserved only for those who accept their Black conscious mind in a near white body as a

⁸⁷ McCloud 118-137. Chapter five of McCloud's *Understanding Comics*, "Living In Line," details the significance even the smallest line can have in communicating meaning to a reader.

⁸⁸ Johnson and Pleece, *Incogengro*, 129

tool for use in the fight for racial justice. It refers to the ability for a Black person to enter into white circles that are normally at best, hostile, or at worst, violent, to phenotypically Black people. “Incognegro” is also used as a pseudonym, or pen name, that Zane uses to protect his real identity as he goes undercover in the south at personal risk to his own life. (See figure 18 at right.) Instead of signing his inflammatory articles with his own name, he signs them “Incognegro,” which provides an identity, though a still relatively anonymous one. And though it is a pseudonym, it also refers to a specific identity, not an abstract idea. Various people throughout the text refer to different people as the “Incognegro,” believing they can identify the one true Incognegro.

Yet, as the text reveals, such an identity can be shared. Zane is the self-proclaimed Incognegro, but Carl, unfortunately, is coded by the white citizens of the small town in Mississippi where the majority of the story takes place as the Incognegro. Such an identity becomes dangerous, especially considering the title as a blanket, under which any person may stand and be taken for the man. Carl falls victim to the nebulousness of such an identity and suffers the fatal consequences of being caught playing a dangerous game.

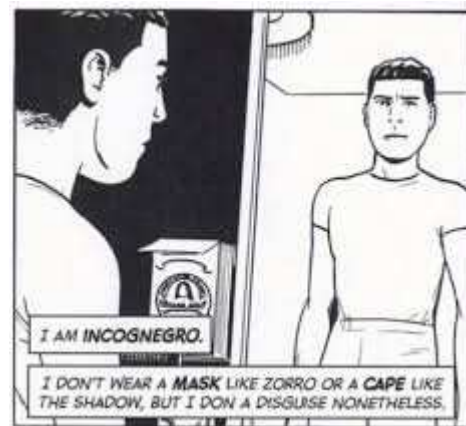


Figure 23 Incognegro, 18

But there is, in fact a third, Incognegro—one who does not willingly take the title, but rather it is forced upon him in a rather ingenious way. The main antagonist of the story (who is interestingly and significantly unnamed) is the lead Klansman on lynching story Zane is almost caught researching. (See figure 19 at left.) The unnamed lead Klansman opens his paper at the end of the graphic novel to see that his face has been connected with the “Incognegro” identity in print. Zane cunningly gets his revenge by “revealing” the identity of the Incognegro as the lead Klansman. Readers familiar with the column are expecting a Black man that looks phenotypically white, but are not aware of any other



Figure 24 The lead Klansman, *Incognegro*, 9

distinguishing characteristics, making it plausible for any white person or any light skinned Black person to represent the Incognegro. Zane bets on this and on the assumption that “white folks see what they

want to see. That’s what makes them so easy

to fool with this passing thing.”⁸⁹ Zane uses the white obsession with race against them: a Black man passing as white would very obviously deny being Black to avoid being lynched—if the lead Klansman denies the Incognegro identity, the white community members will assume that they have apprehended the right spy. There is no form of identification that will satisfy angry white supremacists enough to save the lead Klansman’s life, thus he will be killed with his own sword.

The lead Klansman, as noted before, operates, like the Incognegro, under a guise of anonymity due to his lack of name. Such anonymity has several functions, one of

⁸⁹ Johnson and Pleece, *Incognegro*, 64

which, as has been discussed, is freedom to move from space to space without carrying physical markers which would lead them to be recognized. Another function, which is particularly relevant with the Klansman, is fear. The unknown name of the Klansman reaffirms the sometimes overwhelming anxiety of Black people during this time in interacting with white people—often, Klansmen were not easily identifiable. They might have been anyone. In the same way Black people passing as white carried the knowledge of their Black identity as a secret, so did many Klansmen, who masqueraded as respectable community members. Giving the lead Klansman of the story a name would also provide the reader with the opportunity to deny the prevailing climate of hostility towards Black people during this time period—a name acts as an exception. This one specific person behaved as such, thus, not any way indicative of the behavior of an entire race of people. Without a name and with as few identifiers as possible, this behavior and these thoughts do not get attached to anyone specific person or a few, but rather become more abstract—thoughts that could belong to any of the characters. That becomes the danger, as Josiah Ryder, Zane’s black temporary companion, says: “white folks do see what they want to see. And that’s what makes them so damn dangerous.”⁹⁰

⁹⁰ Johnson and Pleece, *Incognegro*, 64



Figure 25 After being falsely accused of being the Incognegro, Carl is lynched. *Incognegro*, 108.

Indeed, Ryder’s observation that white folks seeing what they want to see forebodes Carl’s fate. We visually see the precarious nature of the Incognegro identity in the panel just before Carl is lynched at the hands of the mob who has apprehended the wrong person—though admittedly neither the mob nor Carl for that matter, seem to be interested in correcting the identity slip.

He is literally perched upon a type writer--his identity as the Incognegro is literally dependent upon the power of word to support him. (See figure 25 above.) This visually represents the idea that these identities are entirely created by word, with no concrete justification other than what one says. These identities can be created—and destroyed—with just a few simple words and the right (or wrong) person to believe them. These created identities based on word of mouth truth, are incidentally, the basis for passing, generally, during the time period.

Passing

Literary critic Werner Sollors defines what ‘passing’ has come to mean, given the complexity of America’s racial history as follows: “‘Passing’ is used most frequently, however, as if it were short for ‘passing for white,’ in the sense of ‘crossing over’ the color line in the United States from the black to the white side.’”⁹¹ In *Incognegro: A Graphic Mystery*, passing takes on more dimension than it has in traditional passing

⁹¹ Werner Sollors, *Neither Black Nor White Yet Both: Thematic Explorations of Interracial Literature*. (1997) Cambridge: Harvard University Press.. 247

stories, because now we no longer rely exclusively on our imagination to create an image of what a Black man that can pass for white may look like—now we have a visual reference.



Figure 26 Zane's transformation (18)

But Johnson and Pleece do not make it that simple for the reader. They still must perform a certain level of intellectual work while reading the graphic novel, because the main character, Zane, who passes for white, is not the only character whose racial make-up is in question: *all* of the characters lack racial markers. The importance of this lack of racial markers is underscored by the references to Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* on pages 18 and 19 of the text, which Tim Caron identifies: "The pages accompanying the verbal and visual description of Zane adopting his Incognegro persona are among the most powerful in the entire book, reminiscent of the meditations on race and nationhood from the opening and closing pages of Ellison's *Invisible Man*."⁹² As we see Zane beginning to transform into the Incognegro, it is important to consider all of the other times in which we see characters transforming or passing for other identities so as to access the promise of American citizenship.

⁹² Caron, 158

Zane passes for multiple different identities in Mississippi: he passes first for an assistant to Klansmen to obtain the information of the white citizens involved in the first lynching he investigates; then, he passes for a Klansman from Biloxi sent to Tupelo to report on the “Pinchy” incident. In order to pass for a Klansman, Zane must not only comply with the “rules of whiteness” but also must be familiar with the lingo of the Klansmen, which we see when he has an exchange with one right as he departs the train

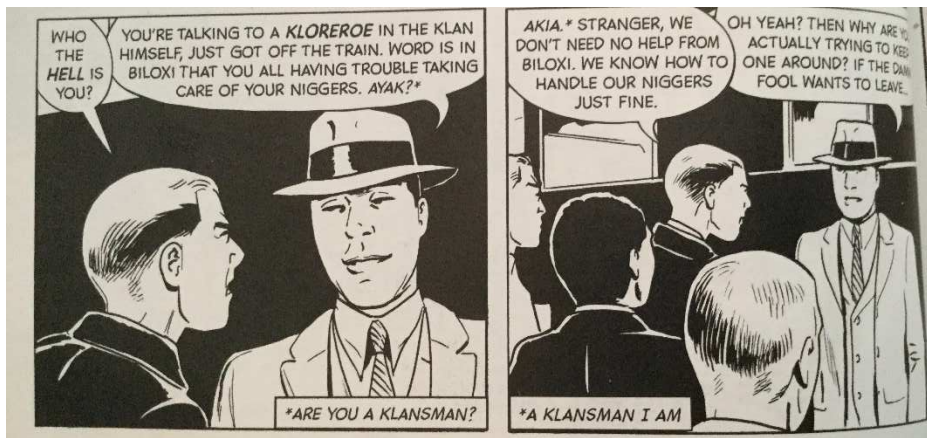


Figure 27 Zane passes as a Klansman. *Incognegro*, 24.

upon arrival
(see figure
22.) Despite
all of Zane’s
careful efforts
to use faux
white

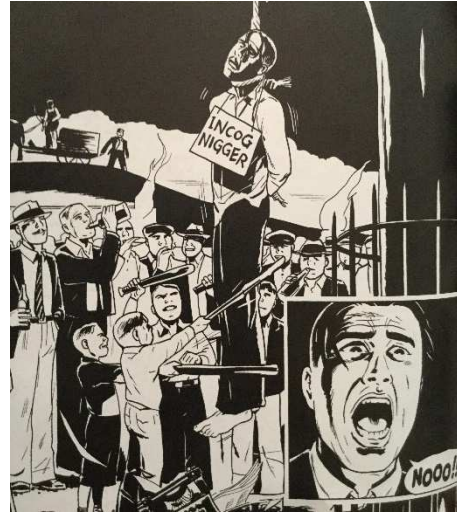
identity, he is still recognizable, to a degree, as Pinchy’s brother. Michaela Mathers, Pinchy’s beloved notes, “You look the same in the face and the build, and you move the same, talk it too, but besides that you ain’t nothing alike.”⁹³

As far as Michaela herself is concerned, Caron also mentions that, for the most part, her contribution to the ‘passing’ narrative of the story is largely ignored, saying, “This example of gender passing receives no attention at all.”⁹⁴ Despite mentioning it as a way of bringing the issue to light, Caron still does very little work on Michaela’s situation. To what degree does gender complicate the passing narrative?

⁹³ Johnson and Pleece, 50

⁹⁴ Caron, 144

To review Michaela's history is to look at the larger story of Francis Jefferson-White, who has been passing as a man since before the start of the story. The reader knows very little about why Francis was passing as a man, though Zane reveals to the sheriff that he knew Francis was a woman that she was "pretending to be a man so she could live without limitations, I assume. So



she could have her job.”⁹⁵ Zane portrays Francis sympathetically, though admittedly, while still ascribing to the problematic assumption that women seek to be men in order to obtain their freedom, while Michaela confesses to having shot Francis, saying bitingly to the sheriff, “If your man-girl wanted to be treated like she was coming for a tea party, she should have worn a dress.”⁹⁶ We know that Francis’ true identity was secret, but know few other facts. The sheriff does not confirm nor deny Zane’s deduction that Francis was trying to access more out of the life by becoming a man, nor do we know whether her decision to become a man was a transgender dilemma—whether she was a man trapped in a woman’s body. Regardless of the circumstance, we *do* know that Michaela killed Francis, then, rather than assuming Francis’ identity, she places her identity as Michaela Mathers onto Francis, by clothing her in her own accoutrements, solidifying the identity.

In spite of escaping the danger of societal imposed identities in death, Francis still falls victim to its horrors because though she is dead, others are not, and those still living have the ability to impose identities even in death. Michaela/Francis situation is related to

⁹⁵ Johnson and Pleece, 119

⁹⁶ Johnson and Pleece, 120

Figure 28 Carl's fate. Incogengro, 109

Carl's death as Incognegro—or rather the “Incog-nigger.” Carl has the “Incognegro” identity forced upon him and accepts it, becoming not only the Incognegro, the strong, superhero-like persona with special abilities that Zane creates, but he is forced, by white people, to also become the “Incog-nigger,” the scape-goat of the white supremacists of Tuledo, who punish the “Incog-nigger” as an example. The irony that none of the lynch mob is bothered about making sure they had the real Incognegro, especially, when Incognegro is known to be white looking. One would assume, the lynch mob would be careful to not accidentally catch a white man, but incidentally that *is* ironic ending.

Conclusion

Scholarship on *Incognegro* is rather limited. This is in part due comic studies as beginning to develop itself as a field and due to the recent publication date of the graphic novel. Despite its 2008 publication date, Johnson pens a tale that is wise beyond its years and would fit comfortably among the works those of writers of the Renaissance were creating. Those artists would have appreciated Johnson's ingenuity, his ability to layer meaning, and Pleece's art work which adds even more complication to the mix. Like the Renaissance writers, Johnson is interested in, not pinning down Black identity, but testing its limits to see if it has bounds. He asks questions to which there are neither answers nor guidelines to find them, but questions which guide further inquiry. The relatively short graphic novel has an effect on the reader—the circumstances Johnson describes, the consequential actions and his need to unpack identity, stays with the reader. The ideas are haunting, they linger and weigh on the soul—but Johnson writes with an urgency that demands the reader do the intellectual thought *now*.

Despite the lack of comic scholarship on this particular narrative, Johnson speaks to issues that have plagued Africana Studies scholars and English scholars, Sociologists

and Anthropologists alike. Passing, racial identity, and miscegenation are themes that have reoccurred throughout history, though as Johnson correctly identifies, these themes were most abundantly and openly considered during the Harlem Renaissance. Thus, Johnson takes his contemporary identity crisis to a time when there would have been other artists to take this intellectual journey of finding and understanding the value of ambiguous, multi-faceted, and complex identity with him.

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