

IMAGINING BLACK SUPERPOWER!

MARVEL COMICS' BLACK PANTHER

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In July of 1966, only three months before the Black Panther political party was formed in Oakland, California, Marvel Comics introduced the Black Panther as the first Black superhero admitted into the immortal circle of American comic books. Originally conceived by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby as the “Coal Tiger,” the Black Panther officially entered the “Marvel Universe” via issue 52 of Marvel’s phenomenally popular title *The Fantastic Four*. As the hereditary king of the hidden African nation of Wakanda, the Black Panther possessed mystical powers that endowed him with panther-like strength, speed, senses, reflexes, and agility. Though the Black Panther was not the first Black character to appear in American comics, he was the first Black comics character to possess *superpowers*—an advancement that Marvel would later hail as “nothing short of a revolutionary event.”¹ Considering that police from Greenwood, Mississippi, had arrested Stokely Carmichael for inciting a crowd of 3,000 civil rights marchers with a new cry for “Black Power!” only a few weeks prior to the Black Panther’s debut, Marvel could not have chosen a more controversial moment to unveil its new superhero.

At a time in which African American intellectuals had just begun to explore the new concept of Black Power, what did it mean for the almost exclusively White staff at Marvel to introduce the first representation of Black Superpower? How was Black Superpower imagined at the time and how did it differ from emergent definitions of Black Power? The goal of this paper is to investigate how Black Superpower was configured in the popular cultural icon of the Black Panther as well as how the comics community reacted to and interacted with this new possibility

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for power. Though often dismissed as a seductively puerile and escapist medium, superhero comics have repeatedly served as active public spaces for imagining and contesting the proper relationship between individual Americans and the often invisible forces of contemporary American technoscientific power. Through an analysis of these comics texts and the readers' letters published in them, this paper explores how the concept of Black Superpower was negotiated by Marvel readers through the symbol of the Black Panther.

Power and Pulp

Carmine Infantino, longtime editorial director of DC Comics, once observed, "The theme of comic books is power."² Considering that most comic books traffic in the colorful exploits of superheroes and their superpowers, Infantino's pronouncement might seem remarkably hollow. Yet Infantino was far from naïve, and his comment reflects a much deeper understanding of the relationship between representations of power in superhero comic book culture and perceptions of political and social power within the larger American cultural imaginary. Superpowers give human form to the often invisible exertions of power that undergird every American historical instant by illustrating exactly which powers their readers cannot possess. In doing so, superheroes provide a human interface to the otherwise unimaginable forces of the 20th century technoscientific sublime.

Tom Wolfe evocatively captured the conflation of comic book superpowers with the equally fantastic realm of modern American technoscience in his 1967 account of the American counterculture movement, *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test*:

But of course!—the *feeling*—out here at night, free, with the motor running and the adrenaline flowing, cruising in the neon glories of the new American night—it

was very Heaven to be the first wave of the most extraordinary kids in the history of the world...with all this Straight-6 and V-8 power underneath and all this neon glamour overhead, which somehow tied in with the technological superheroics of the jet, TV, atomic subs, ultrasonics—Postwar American suburbs—glorious world!...the feeling—to be very Superkids! the world’s first generation of the little devils—feeling immune, beyond calamity. One’s parents remembered the sloughing common order, War & Depression—but Superkids knew only the emotional surge of the great payoff, when nothing was common any longer—The Life! A glorious place, a glorious age, I tell you! A very Neon Renaissance—And the myths that actually touched you at the time—not Hercules, Orpheus, Ulysses, and Aeneas—but Superman, Captain Marvel, Batman, The Human Torch, The Sub-Mariner, Captain America, Plastic Man, The Flash—but of course! On Perry Lane, what did they think it was—quaint?—when he talked about the comic-book Superheroes as honest American myths? It was a fantasy world *already*, this electro-pastel world of Mom&Dad&Buddy&Sis in the suburbs.³

Particularly at a time in which the “technological superheroics of the jet, TV, atomic subs, [and] ultrasonics” invisibly subtended the binary logic of US-Soviet superpower rhetoric, comic book superheroes provided an understandable human face to technoscientific power. In considering the relationship between superhero culture and Cold War doctrine, Saul Braun observed in his 1971 *New York Times Magazine* article on comics and counterculture, “Shazam! Here Comes Captain Relevant”:

It is not irrelevant to note that the Vietnamese war developed without hindrance—with some few exceptions—from a generation of men flying around the world on

a fantasy-power trip, and was resisted in the main by their sons, the generation that began rejecting the comic books of the fifties with their sanitized, censored, surreal images of the world: a world in which “we” were good and “they” were bad, in which lawlessness masqueraded as heroism, in which blacks were invisible.... A world in which no superhero, whatever his excesses, ever doubted that he was using his powers wisely and morally.⁴

As Bradford S. Wright has demonstrated in *Comic Book Nation: The Transformation of Youth Culture in America*, superhero comics were one of the major mechanisms by which the young counterculture imagined new configurations of American superpower during the politically turbulent decades of the 1960s and 1970s. The comics company most responsible for the new upsurge in comics popularity during the 1960s was the brashly innovative team of Marvel Comics. Headed by the prolific powerhouse of Stan Lee, Steve Ditko, and Jack Kirby, Marvel reinvented comics during the early 1960s by rejecting the model of the classic superhero as a noble savior who stood outside of humanity in favor of a new kind of antihero who was as mired in the existential challenges as the rest of us and for whom superpower was more of an alienating burden than liberating blessing.

As Wright has noted, the appeal of Marvel’s new superheroes to the upper echelons of the American youth movement during the 1960s and 1970s was profound. Within five years of introducing the *Fantastic Four* in 1961, Marvel’s average sales figures doubled while those of its competitors remained unchanged or declined.⁵ The September 1965 issue of *Esquire Magazine* noted that “Spider-Man was as popular in the radical sector of American universities as Che Guevera.”⁶ In September 1966, *Esquire* again reported the immense popularity of Marvel

Comics among college students across the country and the growth of Marvel Comics' Stan Lee as one of the most prominent youth icons of the time:

The Princeton Debating Society invited Stan Lee, author of Marvel's ten superhero comics, to speak in a lecture series that included Hubert Humphrey, William Scranton and Wayne Morse. Other talks were given at Bard (where he drew a bigger audience than President Eisenhower), N.Y.U. and Columbia...As one Ivy Leaguer told Stan Lee, "We think of Marvel Comics as the twentieth-century mythology and you as this generation's Homer."⁷

While superheroes may have offered a familiar friendly face for adjudicating the appropriate use of power among the growing counterculture of the 1960s, the symbol of the superhero carried a decidedly different connotation for youth within the emerging Black Power movement, in which the term "Superman" often was appropriated as a symbol of the self-aggrandizing hubris of the White-dominated power structures of the United States. In one of his infamous outbursts at the Chicago 7 trial in 1969, Bobby Seale, chairman of the Black Panther Party, exclaimed, "This racist administrative government with its Superman notions and comic book politics. We're hip to the fact that Superman never saved no black people."⁸ Seale also challenged Judge Julius Hoffman during the trial by declaring, "Black people ain't supposed to have a mind? That's what you think. We got a body and a mind. I wonder, did you lose yours in the Superman syndrome comic book stories?"⁹ In his 1970 book entitled *Seize the Time: The Story of the Black Panther Party and Huey P. Newton*, Seale also applied the term "Superman" to an FBI agent during an August 19, 1969, confrontation with Seale in Oakland: "He looked at me and just grinned. He really thought he was Superman. You can just look at a cat and see how he's psychologically goofed up with Superman notions, so brainwashed that he thinks he's

defending the so-called ‘free world.’”¹⁰ Similarly, the Black Power poet and musician Gil Scott-Heron, creator of the now-famous Black Power anthem “The Revolution Will Not Be Televised” in 1970, also later released a song entitled “Ain’t No Such Thing as Superman.”¹¹ From Seale and Heron’s rejection of the concept of “Superman” and US comic book culture, it is apparent that within the different camps of the Black Power movement the category of “superhero” represented yet another mythic symbol of exclusively White superpower and was therefore worthy of critical deconstruction.

By the mid-1960s, it had become increasingly difficult for Marvel to neglect the Civil Rights Movement as one of the most powerful forces within the contemporary American landscape, and, continuing in its tradition of embodying current symbols of social power in human form, Marvel introduced the Black Panther in 1966. Prior to the Black Panther’s premiere, Timely Comics (Marvel’s name before May 1963) had already tested the waters of race relations by introducing its first and decidedly non-super African American character in the early 1940s in its World War II title *Young Allies*. Named Whitewash, the character appeared in blackface and zootsuit and spent a preponderance of his time tied up. Omar Bilal, curator of the online Museum of Black Superheroes, has described Whitewash as “[c]reated for comic effect only, Whitewash was portrayed as a helpless buffoon whose only purpose was to provide laughs as he fell into one dire situation after another.”¹² Around the same time, early comics innovator Will Eisner also introduced Ebony as the Spirit’s sidekick in Eisner’s popular series. Like Whitewash, Ebony appeared in blackface, possessed no powers of his own, and served largely as typical Black minstrel-style relief for the Spirit’s more sober heroics.

With such dubious forerunners in the medium, it is perhaps fortunate that mainstream comics were largely devoid of Black characters after Ebony and Whitewash—that is, until 1963

when Marvel introduced its first “positive” Black character, Gabe Jones. Appearing in Lee and Kirby’s World War II war comic *Sgt. Fury and His Howling Commandos*, which Marvel rebelliously billed as “The War Mag for People Who Hate War Mags,” Jones was a Black soldier in the otherwise all-White squad led by commando-extraordinaire Nick Fury. Though Jones initially did not play a major role in the series, his “Blackness” was an important point for Marvel. When the company in charge of color separation inadvertently assumed Jones was White and colored him pink in the first issue, Lee dispatched a very detailed memo making it clear that Gabe Jones was in fact a Black soldier.¹³

Perhaps even more significant, considering Gabe Jones’ limited visibility, was the gradual inclusion of Black citizens in the backgrounds of various Marvel street scenes. Wright has noted that “random black bystanders, college students, and policemen” can be seen for the first time in the 1965 issues of *The Amazing Spider-Man*.¹⁴ While such acknowledgements of ethnic diversity were long in coming to the comics industry, they were nonetheless among the first mass media presentations that included African Americans as regular members of society. Such representations took a radical leap when Marvel introduced its first Black superhero, the Black Panther.

Though Marvel has hyped the Black Panther’s arrival as a “revolutionary event,” the upheaval seems to have gone largely unnoticed by everyone except comics readers at the time. A survey of the most popular publications which explicitly targeted an African American audience and were in print during 1966 and 1967, including the *Negro Digest*, the *Liberator*, *Freedomways*, *Negro Heritage*, *Ebony*, and the *Chicago Daily Defender*, reveals that the debut of America’s first Black superhero was ignored all of the African American community’s major

publications. The identically named *The Black Panther*, the official publication of the Black Panther Party first released on April 25, 1967, never once mentioned the new Marvel character.

Even more surprisingly, four months after the Black Panther's debut, *Ebony* ran an eight-page article by Ponchitta Pierce, "What's Not Funny about the Funnies: Bias Bans Negros from Popular Comics," in which the author investigated the conspicuous absence of Black characters in daily comic strips.¹⁵ Though also oblivious to the recent introduction of Marvel's Black Panther, Pierce's *Ebony* article underscores the degree to which Marvel's creation of the character was an unquestionably bold move. As Pierce explained, comics printed during the Civil Rights movement ceased to include Black characters for fear of either inadvertently offending African Americans readers who might consider the characters derogatory or, conversely, offending White readers who might be opposed to overly positive representations of Blacks: "'Comic characters are a white man's land,' admits Alfred Andriola, artist and co-creator of Kerry Drake, 'Let's face it. You can't deal with race or color in comics. A colored maid or porter brings on a flood of letters. And if we show the Negro as a hero we get angry letters from the South.'"¹⁶ Charles Hardy has similarly noted in "A Brief History of Ethnicity in Comics" that

In 1961 when "On Stage" featured a Black music coach, four papers immediately canceled the strip. The inclusion by creator Dale Messick in 1965 of a Black girl in "Brenda Starr" caused its temporary removal from circulation, in order not to offend readers in the Southern states. In 1970 when Lieutenant Flap joined the gang at Camp Swampee, "Beetle Bailey" was dropped not only by a number of Southern papers but also, for a short while, by *Stars and Stripes!*¹⁷

According to Jim Shooter, longtime comic book artist and editor-in-chief of Marvel from 1978 to 1987, a reluctance to include Black heroes was not limited to newspaper comic strips but also

extended to comic book producers as well. Shooter recalls that during his employment at DC Comics prior to his move to Marvel, “I had tried to introduce a black Legion of Super-Heroes character in 1966. Mort Weisinger, my editor, rejected the idea. He said that with a black character in it, the book ‘wouldn't sell in the South,’ and that Southern distributors would boycott DC comics.”¹⁸

Enter the Panther

With all the pressure against introducing Black heroes at the time, Marvel’s gamble is all the more significant. But what was Marvel’s vision of Black Superpower, as embodied in the character of the Black Panther? The story and art of the character’s first two issues are instructive. As introduced in issue 52 of *The Fantastic Four*, the Black Panther, also known as T’Challa, is the chieftain of the hidden kingdom of Wakanda, an area deep in the heart of equatorial Africa. Wakanda is the sole global source of an invaluable metal, vibranium, which absorbs vibrations—a quality that makes it fabulously valuable to technological development worldwide.¹⁹ T’Challa’s father was killed by a White ivory hunter, Ulysses Klaw, in an attempt to gain control of Wakanda’s vibranium supply. T’Challa drove Klaw and his henchmen from his country, claimed his inheritance as tribal chieftain, and accepted the sacred and mysterious powers of the Black Panther title. Soon after assuming power, the new leader used his own scientific genius to recreate his jungle country as a modern technological fortress by selling “small portions of vibranium to various scientific foundations, enabling [him] to amass a fortune—the equal of any on earth!”²⁰

T’Challa lures the Fantastic Four, Marvel’s crime-fighting quartet, to his country in order to test his fighting prowess in anticipation of a final showdown with Klaw. The Black

Panther nearly defeats the Fantastic Four; however, he is foiled by neglecting to account for Wyatt Wingfoot, a Native American non-superhero friend of the of the team whom the Black Panther discounted as a threat but eventually frees the team from their various high-tech traps. Thanks to Wingfoot's intervention, the Fantastic Four overpower the unsuspecting Black Panther and demand a reason for his attacking them. The Black Panther reveals that he never intended to hurt the American superheroes, but rather only meant to prove himself in battle in anticipation of Klaw's immanent invasion. Realizing his noble intentions, the Fantastic Four forgive the Black Panther only moments before news that Klaw has breached the Wakandan border. As a symbol of their newfound respect for the Black Panther, the Fantastic Four aid the leader in defeating Klaw and invite him to join them in their global campaign against evil.

Readers were very quick to respond to Marvel's introduction of its first Black superhero, and the printed reactions were extremely positive. The first letter, from Henry Clay of Detroit, appeared in the November 1966 issue of the *Fantastic Four*:

It was my intention to write you last month about [the Black Panther], but I waited to see what his origin would be like. I was joyous about your breaking all the precedents of your profession, and introducing a Negro as a hero in the form of Sgt. Fury's Gabe Jones, and as the man-on-the-street. This subject, before the advent of Marvel, seemed to be an unwritten taboo, but now a real live Negro super-hero!!! This almost had me doing flip-flops and walking around in a daze, saying, "This is good...this is good..." His introduction, origin, and first fight against a real-live-super-villain were all superb! I hope to see him in his own comic soon.²¹

In the following issue of *Fantastic Four*, more letters of support occurred in the letters page. Linda Lee Johnson of New Orleans praised Lee and Kirby by stating, “Bravo to you!...you are the first, the very first to create and introduce a Negro super-hero...This is truly wonderful.”²² In the same letters column, Edward Koh of New Haven, Connecticut, added, “I’d like to tell you, Stan, how touched and proud I was to see you take a stand on a worthwhile cause...Your high ideals in the field of education and other social and moral issues, make me proud to be a Marvel reader.”²³

While these letters lauded Marvel’s bold innovation, perhaps the most eloquent and astute of the initial responses was from Guy Haughton of Bronx, New York, published in the February 1967 issue of *Fantastic Four*. Haughton’s letter began by underscoring the importance of Marvel’s introduction of a Black superhero to the struggles of African Americans:

Believe it or not, you guys really are actually easing the tension of our times. Really, I mean it. It is certainly quite easing for a young Negro as myself – after hearing all day about racial outbursts and riots – to sit down, open a Marvel mag, and on page 2, panel 7 or the like, to see a colored man walking down the street. You, my dear friends, may never understand this, but it is really exhilarating. It is psychological uplifting that – yes, even in something as small as a comic magazine – the existence of the Negro race is acknowledged...Then you came out with the Black Panther...I don’t want to sound melodramatic, but I want to commend your courage, for indeed, it has taken courage to do what you have done...You, my friends, are doing more than entertaining the masses, for you are promoting human respect and bringing about a better world.²⁴

However, despite Haughton's obvious appreciation of Marvel's introduction of the Black Panther, he ends his letter with a powerful critique of Marvel's representation of Black Superpower:

Okay – one mild complaint. [*sic*] let's see how I can get this over to you. Alright, so you've got a Negro super-hero, but does he have to be an African chieftain and whatnot? Couldn't he have been a plain American? I mean if you had an Italian super-hero, would you make him the Masked Ferarri??²⁵

Though only a few sentences, Haughton's closing remarks speak volumes about Marvel's decision to construct the Panther as an African rather than African American superhero. Such a distinction allowed Marvel to be hip and relevant while at the same time safely distancing Black Superpower from the tumult of the Black Power movement at home. Marvel's solution to the problem of introducing a marginalized character was not original: it unapologetically replicated the strategy that DC Comics had employed when it introduced Wonder Woman as its first female superhero in December of 1941. As princess of the Amazon nation of Paradise Island, Wonder Woman similarly embodied super-empowerment of an American minority from a discreet political distance.

While it is understandable why Haughton obviously considered such political distancing a copout, it would be a mistake to restrict the symbolic importance of the Black Panther's homeland of Wakanda to merely a clever device for safely containing the superhero's Black Superpower. Rather, the lavishly technologized landscape of Wakanda was often the most "super" part of the Black Panther's personality. Even Lee and Kirby seemed bored by the mendacity of Panther's feline powers. Rather than inventing an intriguing source for the Black Panther's superpowers, Lee and Kirby borrowed from traditionally Social Darwinian tropes

conflating Blackness and animality and flippantly cloaked the issue in a cloud of pseudo-ethnographic exoticism by dismissing them as “A secret—handed down from chieftain to chieftain! We eat certain herbs—and undergo rigorous rituals—of which I am forbidden to speak!”²⁶

What did fuel Lee and Kirby’s imagination was the technological oasis they created for the Black Panther. While devoting only the single abovementioned panel to a description of the Black Panther’s superpowers, Kirby filled panel after panel with the snaking, cryptically mechanical limbs of the Wakandan pseudoforest, and Lee stacked the narrative with exclamation of awe after exclamation of awe at the artificial wonderland. Even after aligning with the Black Panther, the Fantastic Four were continuously astounded by the paradox of a primitive and exclusively Black society existing in an advanced technoscientific Shangri-la. In inextricably fusing the figure of the Black Panther with postwar America’s two most nostalgized utopias—the paradisiacal past of Biblical Eden and the space age promise of Disney’s Tomorrowland—Lee and Kirby presented an alluring vision of Black Superpower that enlivened the Black Panther’s otherwise lackluster character.

Black Superpower vs. Black Power

Despite its self-conscious position as the first comic book company to introduce a Black superhero to its lineup, Marvel also made it clear, from its first responses to Black Panther fans’ letters, that while it overwhelmingly supported a “colorblind” approach to equal rights for all peoples in the world, it was not a direct proponent of the Black Power movement, particularly as expressed by such militants as the Black Panther Party. In response to Henry B. Clay’s letter, Marvel first articulated its colorblind position:

We too are fond of the Black Panther—not because he’s a Negro—but because he’s a right Joe! In fact, isn’t this the most important lesson to be learned—we’re still entitled to our likes and dislikes—nobody has to be a Pollyanna—but let’s base our opinion of a fellow human being on his basic qualities and character—*not* on the color of his birth!²⁷

Shortly after the Black Panther had been added to the Avengers team, in the July 1968 issue of the series, Marvel printed a letter in the *Avengers* in which Lawrence Isaacson, a teacher from Brooklyn suggested that “As there is never too much that can be done to lessen the tensions between the races, why not introduce a black Avenger in the lineup? The effect upon your youthful (and occasionally more adult) readers could only be beneficial.”²⁸ Consistent with the earlier response to Clay’s letter, Isaacson’s request generated the following response:

By now, Larry, you know that you’ve got your wish, as the Black Panther has become the fourth member of our peerless quartet. However, just for the record, we ought to make it clear that we didn’t have our African Avenger sign up because he was a Negro, any more than we had Captain America originally become an Avenger just because he had blond hair. In our eyes, the important thing is whether or not an individual member adds something to the group, not what color his skin happens to be.²⁹

The company’s colorblind stance on Black Superpower was very different from contemporaneous notions of African American self-determination and cultural separatism as advocated by most proponents of Black Power. Rather, Marvel idealistically envisioned a world in which “race and creed”³⁰ were irrelevant factors. In case readers had missed Marvel’s position on civil rights in the letters pages of *Fantastic Four* and the *Avengers*, Marvel also decided to run

a Stan's Soapbox editorial in all Marvel titles appearing in September, 1968, in which Stan Lee reiterated the absence of any definitive political stance at Marvel Comics. "But," Lee added, "we'd like to go on record about one vital issue – we believe that Man has a divine destiny, and an awesome responsibility – the responsibility of treating all who share this wondrous world of ours with tolerance and respect – judging each fellow human on his own merit, regardless of race, creed, or color. That we agree on – and we'll never rest until it becomes a fact, rather than just a cherished dream!"³¹

However, stating that Marvel officially remained neutral to the evolving issues of Black Power does not entirely capture the complicated interaction between the Black Power movement and Marvel's version of Black Superpower. While one could most likely attribute the failure of the various African American presses in noticing the Black Panther's debut to a necessary focus on the more immediately pressing issues of the Civil Rights movement, Marvel's intentional omissions concerning the Black Panther's relation to the Black Power movement are decidedly more relevant and telling. After his initial debut and limited run in the *Fantastic Four*, which culminated in his appearance in the year-end annual, the Black Panther inexplicably vanished from comics for an entire year. Although it could have been a mere coincidence, the Black Panther's disappearance roughly corresponds to a dramatic increase in Black Power militancy in 1967. On 2 May 1967, the Black Panther Party received national press attention when thirty heavily armed Party members in black leather jackets and berets staged a protest in front of the California state capitol. Racial tensions continued to heighten throughout the summer as Newark then Detroit erupted in the largest race riots in national history. By the end of July, the Black Power Conference in Newark had called for the permanent partitioning of the United States into Black and White nations. While there are many possible explanations for the Black Panther's

disappearance in comics through 1967, it is likely that the character's absence reflects Marvel's desire to avoid associations with the radical political party that shared the character's name.³²

When the Black Panther did finally reemerge in a January 1968 issue of *Tales of Suspense*, he did so as a very different manifestation of Black Superpower. Not only did Marvel choose to reintroduce the Black Panther alongside its bastions of American patriotism and the military-industrial complex, Captain America and Iron Man, but the first Black superhero also no longer bore the name "the Black Panther." Instead, he was referred to simply as "the Panther," a name that followed him in his move to the Avengers, where the team exclusively referred to him either by "the Panther" or simply as "T'Challa." Once again, Marvel's political sleight of hand did not go unnoticed by its readers. In August 1968, the *Avengers* editors printed a letter from Lee Gray of Detroit, Michigan, in which Gray noted, "Just because he is a Negro is no reason to take 'Black' out of his name."³³ In response to Gray's comment, the editors countered with the claim that "we certainly didn't do it because of his being a Negro! We just did it to cut down on the number of "Black" characters romping through our merry mags – like the Black Knight, the Black Widow, and the Black Marvel to name a few!"³⁴ Despite this explanation, the editors immediately acquiesced to Gray's complaint, announcing that "again Marveldom Assembled has voted it down – and you've probably already noticed that the Panther is the Black Panther once more!"

Such maneuverings quietly promoted Marvel's colorblind position on racial equality while avoiding any direct connections to elements of the Black Power movement. But Marvel's neutrality regarding the Black Panther's relationship to Black Power was not sustained. In the March 1970 issue of the *Avengers* 74 entitled "Pursue The Panther!," Roy Thomas and John Buscema for the first time involved the Black Panther in a storyline that directly implicated the

character in a racially motivated struggle against a White supremacist group, the Sons of the Serpent. At the outset, the Black Panther is captured by his Sons of the Serpent adversaries, who defame him by sending an imposter to rob local businesses and court media attention. To make matters worse, two radical political pundits—Hale, an African American advocate of Black Power, and Dunn, a conservative White supremacist—engage in a violent televised confrontation concerning the recent reports of the Black Panther that threatened to ignite the whole nation in a race riot.

In the end, the Avengers foil the insidious plans of the Sons of the Serpent not only by unmasking the Black Panther imposter on live television, but also by revealing that there are in fact *two* different Supreme Serpents—none other than Hale and Dunn themselves. Following the Avengers' capture of Dunn and Hale, Monica Lynne, African American jazz diva and T'Challa's romantic interest, denounces the unfortunate incident: "If only we could undo the harm which a man like Montague Hale has done to...my people! How many minds can a viper like him poison against our cause?" The Black Panther ringingly assures Monica, "Don't underrate people, Monica! Most of them know that a cause may be right...though a leader or two be wrong!"³⁵

By portraying Dunn and Hale as the enemies, the moral of Marvel's story was not an understated one: political extremists and hate-mongers from both sides of racial debates were often more concerned with their own ambitious lust for power than with the welfare of the people they purported to defend. Marvel maintained its colorblind stance on race relations while condemning the more extreme political radicals from both the White Supremacist and Black Power camps. The company had apparently broken its own self-imposed silence on racial issues by sending a very direct message to the nation's youth, in which it had emphatically denounced any form of racial extremism.

Seven months later, Roy Thomas again employed the Black Panther in a story dealing with racial radicalism. Appearing as a guest star in issue number 69 of *Daredevil*, “A Life on the Line,” the Black Panther teamed up with the blind superhero to battle a group of Black militants, the Thunderbolts. In the course of the action, the Black Panther proclaims, “Those vermin aren’t interested in Black Power...only in Thunderbolt power.”³⁶ The Thunderbolt leader, for his part, taunts the Black Panther: “Well, well, well, if it ain’t—the Panther! The original establishment Black man himself!”³⁷

In many ways, Thomas’ portrayal of the Black Panther in “A Life On The Line” marked a turning point in the development of the character. The depiction of the Thunderbolts, clearly a fictionalized version of the real-life Black Panther Party, marked Marvel’s first expressed opposition to the group. “A Life On The Line” was also the first presentation of racially charged terms such as “Black Power,” “the Establishment,” and “Uncle Tom” in relation to the Black Panther. While the Black Panther apparently advocated his own nonviolent, education-based version of Black Power through the efforts of his alter-ego Luke Charles, the storyline portrayed him as directly opposed to any form of Black militancy. Whereas Marvel had initially cast the Black Panther in a relatively disinterested and tangential relationship to American culture and politics, Thomas’ “A Life On The Line” signaled the beginning of a transitional period in which the Black Panther was increasingly depicted as an ideal role model for “appropriate” forms of African American activism.

Marvel’s ambiguities surrounding Thomas’ new use of the Black Panther as a Black figurehead for a non-militant White agenda divided readers more than any other point in the superhero’s history. Readers (most likely White) applauded Thomas’ use of the character as yet another example of Marvel’s desire to always remain progressive and relevant with respect to the

most social issues of the time. In response to “A Life on the Line,” Evan P. Katten of Bala-Cynwyd, Pennsylvania, wrote:

I was very much impressed by DAREDEVIL #69... the teamwork of Daredevil and the Black Panther simply shouts for more!...This could be the team that works on social unrest—a blind white man and a black man, both of whom, unfortunately, represent two of the greatest handicaps in today’s world, though neither is to blame for them.³⁸

Though seemingly well-intentioned, Katten’s equation of “Blackness” with a physical handicap ran contrary to nearly everything the Black Power movement stood for. At least for some readers, Marvel seemed to have succeeded in its attempt to engage believably with the uneasy social tensions of the time.

Not all readers were so impressed by Thomas’ attempts at “presenting life as it truly is.”³⁹ In particular, African American readers considered the writer’s characterization of the Black Panther an affront to Black Power as well as an unrealistic presentation of “Blackness” itself. Unlike the other letters which appeared in the same issue, William James of Youngstown, Ohio, evaluated the “A Life on the Line” story as follows:

[L]et me consider DD #69 and Roy Thomas, and the effect the story had on me. Being Black, I, like any other Black Person, is always a bit cynical about a white writer who attempts to write about us. No matter how much he may sympathize with the Black cause, he will never be able to think Black...Thomas’ characterization of Black people, from the type of dialogue he imposes upon his Black characters, seems to depict a bunch of black-skinned white people...What

you need to do, Roy Thomas, is to go out and find yourself a crib somewhere in the heart of the Harlem ghetto and try to cop some Ghetto talk.⁴⁰

James' criticisms paled in comparison to the only letter printed in response to Thomas' "Pursue the Panther!" Though it took five months for Marvel to print a response to the story, Marvel devoted the entire letters page of *Avengers* number 79 to a single detailed letter "in its entirety (except for one deleted expletive)"⁴¹ from Philip Mallory Jones of Ithaca, New York, in which the reader upbraided both Stan Lee and Thomas for their biased and overly simplistic attempts in representing the country's racial problems. Jones opened his letter by identifying himself as "a black writer and long-time reader of your very often sophisticated magazines." Jones' first critique regarded a character's statement that "T'Challa only hid the fact that he was black because he wanted to be judged as a man...not a racial type!" In response, Jones argued: "That's very white of you. This implies that this champion of justice etc. could not be considered as a man if it were known that he was black—that in fact, only if there is a chance that he is white can he be judged as a man."⁴² Similarly, regarding another comment from the *Avengers* on the same page that "The Panther's bein' framed...!", Jones countered with a politically heated claim that, for the first time in the comic's pages, mentioned either Black Power movements or the Black Panther party itself in relationship to the character. Such a statement, he observed,

assumes that the judicial system is legitimate, and that an extra-legal element is pulling a fast one on blind justice—utter garbage. The recent conviction of the Chicago Seven and Bobby Seale, not to mention the national repression of the Black Panther Party and the murders of Hampton and Clark, point a damning finger at the system itself, to say the least.⁴³

Jones added that while the whole story was designed to prove that the Black Panther was not “a marauder” just because he was Black, such a need for justification “implies blackness is criminal” and “assumes that white America is sitting in patient judgement, waiting to be convinced that black is not what they see it as—criminal violence.”⁴⁴ Echoing James’ letter, Jones also chastised Thomas for portraying the character Montague Hale as though he were a White person in a black body : “HALE=UNCLE TOM (because he is engaged in this ridiculous rhetoric of debate)=AMERICA’S MYTHIC NEGRO (clean, speaks grammarian English, thinks like a white man would imagine he would think if he were black).”⁴⁵

While James and Jones’ letters raise many compelling points regarding Thomas’ interpretation of the Black Panther, their most salient commonality is an adamant rejection of Thomas’ representation of Blackness itself. Through their related critiques of Thomas’ portrayal of African American characters as “black-skinned white people” who “[think] like a white man would imagine he would think if he were black,” James and Jones actively defended the territory of Blackness from what they believed to be Thomas’ attempts at cultural colonization. As such, the discursive world represented by the Black Panther became an actively contested space in which Marvel and its readers sparred over appropriate configurations of Black Power and Black Superpower.

Bringing It Home

The changes that the Black Panther underwent in the beginning of the 1970s proved relatively minor in comparison to his various transformations throughout the remainder of the decade. In 1973, an up-and-coming young writer, Don McGregor, was unexpectedly handed Marvel’s failing bimonthly series *Jungle Action* and instructed to give the Black Panther a starring role in

the title. Prior to McGregor's involvement, *Jungle Action* featured Tharn the Magnificent, a White Tarzan knockoff who battled jungle creatures alongside two beautiful White female sidekicks. In McGregor's hands, *Jungle Action* became the Black Panther's default solo title for the next four years. After transitioning from his role in the *Avengers*, the Black Panther assumed his new trajectory in issue 6 when McGregor took control and launched readers on his expansive 13-issue epic storyline entitled "Panther's Rage." At the outset of "Panther's Rage," the Black Panther realized he had lost touch with his native kingdom as his control of Wakanda is challenged by a rival chieftain named Erik Killmonger. The Black Panther's protracted search to find and defeat Killmonger and his cadre of evil lieutenants gradually assumes the shape of an Odyssean saga, in which the Black Panther not only defeats Killmonger but painfully faces his own responsibility in allowing his country to suffer in his absence and slowly rebuilds his connection to his beloved homeland.

The first letter to appear in the "Jungle Reactions" column was printed in the July 1974 issue of *Jungle Action*. Responding to "Panther's Rage," Gary Frazier of Eugene, Oregon, kicked off the discussion by calling the story "revolutionary," particularly McGregor's subtle attention to the differences in language, which suggested more broadly "that Africans in Africa are different from Afro-Americans."⁴⁶ In the following issue, Bob Hughes of New Haven, Connecticut, added, "After all those great white fathers (and mothers) we've had tromping across Africa, a real bona-fide Black African jungle king was desperately needed."⁴⁷ In issue 12 in November 1974, Dean Mullaney of Staten Island, New York, commented "It's great to see blacks drawn realistically for a change."⁴⁸ In the same issue, Meloney M.H. Crawford of Saratoga Springs, New York, remarked, "The interpersonal relationship and character developments reach a sensitivity that is rare in today's comics," adding that "The 'Panther's

Rage' is an emotional experience, like any great work of art." Crawford concluded by asserting the importance of Wakanda's existence as an independent African nation ruled by Blacks: "One final comment: Wakanda must survive! It is encouraging to know it has withstood the onslaught of white hunters, jungle girls, and Tarzan-types, and has remained a settlement of BLACK people in the African jungle."⁴⁹ In a similar vein, Ralph Macchio of Cresskill, New Jersey, contended (at considerable length) in the following issue that

Don, once again, your characterizations of the entire Panther-cast were so clearly defined, I honestly felt as if I knew them. From the false bravado of Tayete to the overtly indulgent self-pity of Monica, you have unobtrusively helped advance the cause of the Negro far more than the melodramatic "relevancy" of Marvel's competitors that was big a few years ago...Over the past several months, we have seen the inner workings of an all-Black society, with its customs, conflicts, and yes, prejudices...One other thing: please keep guest stars from other mags out of this series, because as you've presented Wakanda to us, it appears to be a self-contained world within a world, and I like that, immensely.⁵⁰

Having successfully concluded "Panther's Rage" In November 1975, McGregor and the *Jungle Action* crew immediately took their engaging vision of Black Superpower on the road by launching the ambitious and controversial "The Panther vs. The Klan!" saga in January 1976. In this storyline, Monica Lynne and T'Challa travel to Monica's childhood home in rural Georgia to mourn the suspected suicide of Monica's sister Angela. However, almost immediately upon their arrival in Georgia, Monica and the Black Panther become embroiled in a clash with two secret societies implicated in Angela's death: the notorious Ku Klux Klan and the fictional Dragon Circle. While most critics agree "The Panther vs. The Klan!" never achieved the same

artistic cohesiveness and narrative success as “Panther’s Rage,” the realistic subject matter, highly emotional scripts, and poignant illustrations that comprise the “The Panther vs. The Klan!” furthered readers’ identification with the story and evoked letters of unparalleled empathy from White and Black readers alike, including the following intimate disclosure from a reader identified only as “S.D.W.” situated “On the road”:

I’ve just finished JUNGLE ACTION #21...shaking...It has been months since I left Louisville, but the sights/sounds/smells of my encounters with the Klan and the anti-busers linger on. As I read “A Cross Burning Darkly, Blackening the Night,” all those events came rushing back...Don, your perceptions of character and contemporary myth/reality are so fine, so strong...and I wonder if here, in this oh-so-American drama, we can play the myth through, find the America we started to look for so many years ago.⁵¹

Despite the impressive feedback that McGregor and the *Jungle Action* team enjoyed from its loyal readers, the series suffered an untimely demise. It was cancelled In November 1976, only six issues into the “Panther vs. the Klan!” storyline. While many reasons have been offered for the unexpected cancellation of *Jungle Action*, most explanations center on business pragmatics and poor sales figures. Jim Shooter has also suggested McGregor’s authorial obduracy led to his dismissal. According to Shooter, McGregor “utterly refused to take direction of any kind, to change a thing he was doing, to take any steps whatsoever to improve sales. There was no way to work with him, no way to help him.”⁵² Not surprisingly, McGregor has offered a counter explanation for his dismissal. While admitting that *Jungle Action* sales were not what either he or Marvel would have liked, the writer has repeatedly suggested that his

decision to create the politically controversial “The Panther vs. The Klan!” story arc was among the primary reasons for both ending the series and eventually dismissing him from Marvel:

The dismissal editor said, and I quote, quite accurately, because some things I don’t forget, “Don, you’re too close to the black experience.” That’s the verbal reason given, I kid you not, as I looked at the back and front of my white hands. To which the editor responded, “You know what I mean.” And that...was the end of my time on the Panther.⁵³

Ironically, it would take the Black Panther’s original co-creator Jack Kirby to reveal the true extent of readers’ personal investment in McGregor’s vision of the Black Panther. Two months after the last issue of *Jungle Action*, the Black Panther resurfaced in the first issue of his first self-titled series. The entirely new *Black Panther* series was written, illustrated, and edited by none other than Jack Kirby himself. Kirby, who left Marvel in 1970 after creative differences with Stan Lee, returned to the company in 1975 and, according to Shooter, was looking for titles to satisfy his new contract, which specified Kirby’s writing and penciling four issues a month. In the wake of McGregor’s removal from *Jungle Action*, Kirby found himself once again in command of the Black Panther. In an editorial comment from Kirby that appeared in the first issue, the new author promised Black Panther fans a “*NEW BLACK PANTHER*,” pledging “I can only say that you’re due to see the Panther the way he was originally meant to be.”⁵⁴ If readers had any doubts about the sincerity of Kirby’s dramatic predictions for change, they vanished upon reading the first issue. Kirby delivered a new interpretation of the Black Panther—to the extent that the character bore absolutely no relation to his most recent incarnation in *Jungle Action*. The initial story, “King Solomon’s Frog!,” inaugurated the series by immersing the Black Panther in an intergalactic struggle for an ancient magical artifact—a

plot that included nothing less than a brass frog that functioned as an ancient time machine, a midget sidekick, and an eggplant-headed humanoid from the distant future named “Hatch-22.”

Not surprisingly, readers immediately responded to Kirby’s radical changes to the Black Panther. The majority of these letters conveyed a pronounced sense of betrayal and personal loss as fans assailed Kirby for tampering with McGregor’s vision of the Black Panther. In issue 3 of the *Black Panther*, the first letter printed in response to the new series was from Bill Dickenson of Crystal, Minnesota:

I hope that you don’t plan on transforming the Black Panther into just another super-hero. Although this is an integral part of his character, his royal heritage cannot be overlooked. He is a true leader of men, the kind of leader we all look for. I also hope that a delicate balance is struck between the action/adventure hero and the concern he has shown for his race and for men of all creed and colors.⁵⁵

While Dickenson expressed his desire that the Black Panther not lose the depth of character McGregor gave to the superhero, his comments were relatively mild in comparison to a letter from Jana Hollingsworth of Bellingham, Washington:

I can fully understand and appreciate, though not agree with, your desire for a less controversial storyline than McGregor’s “Panther vs. the Klan.” Listen, I am not one of Don’s coterie of fanatic fans—I quite disliked his LUKE CAGE—but his PANTHER stories were among the finest ever produced. They were relevant not in the cheap *chic* sense, but truly relevant both to the special problems of today and the eternal condition of mankind. McGregor’s storylines were as complex as the real world, and his characters were genuine human beings. After “The

Panther's Rage" and "The Panther vs. the Klan" there is only one word to describe "King Solomon's Frog": obscene...As originally presented in FANTASTIC FOUR #52 and #53, the Panther was *not* the crazy cosmic character you've depicted. He was the chieftain of an African nation which combined its traditional heritage with Western super-science. In "Panther's Rage" McGregor explored this original premise on a more sophisticated and realistic level...Please, please, don't abandon this real world to go careening throughout the universe. The real world is what is truly fascinating...I'm not asking for the return of McGregor. I know that won't happen. I am asking for Kirby's departure.⁵⁶

Unfortunately for Kirby, Dickenson and Hollingsworth's responses were just initial volleys in a long barrage of letters, begging Kirby and Marvel to not "forget what Don McGregor and Billy Graham set out to do with this character in JUNGLE ACTION."⁵⁷ In issue after issue, readers bombarded Kirby with protests to restore the "real world" of Black Panther and Wakanda to its previous glory. In doing so, many readers, such as John Judge of Clinton, Idaho, scathingly vilified Kirby, charging: "To take Marvel's first black character and depersonalize him so severely is criminal."⁵⁸

Sadly, Kirby's awkward attempts to convert his readers to his new vision for the Black Panther only served to fan the flames. In issue 6, Kirby controversially referenced Alex Haley's 1976 Pulitzer Prize winning novel *Roots* to justify his perspective: "And, as you may have already noticed, my character is neither a Kunta Kinte nor a Chicken George..."⁵⁹ In the ninth issue, Kirby revealed "the Black Musketeers" with the cover tagline: "His homeland facing holocaust—T'Challa goes wild!" Tellingly, the same issue also marked the permanent disappearance of the letters pages from the *Black Panther*. Following the release of his twelfth

issue of the *Black Panther* and the culmination of his second year on the title in November 1978, Kirby quietly handed off the series to Ed Hannigan and Jerry Bingham. Jim Shooter has confirmed that the change was not due to poor sales but was entirely Kirby's decision.⁶⁰ Whether from disgruntled fan mail or his growing lack of interest with the Black Panther character, Kirby had washed his hands of the superhero. Only three issues after Kirby's departure from the title, Marvel discontinued the *Black Panther* in May 1979.

Reading the Medium

Regardless of how one reads the reader responses to *Jungle Action*, it is quite obvious that something singular happened to the Black Panther under McGregor's tenure. In McGregor's hands, *Jungle Action* became one of the most intricately conceived and artistically audacious Marvel titles. After Marvel's brief 2-issue trip to Wakanda in those first issues of *Fantastic Four*, the country disappeared from view as the Black Panther became an immigrant to America. After years of restless squatting in the margins of more traditionally superheroic titles, the Black Panther regained his homeland—a country so richly imagined and captivatingly vivid that readers became profoundly connected to it. What McGregor and his team understood is precisely what Lee and Kirby seemed to realize when they first created the Black Panther: that the character's superpowers were mind-numbingly dull but the concept of Wakanda is endlessly compelling. While Lee and Kirby chose not to expand upon Wakanda's potential, McGregor developed it as fully as possible.

In 1999, Dwayne McDuffie, comic book writer and co-founder of the most successful Black-owned comic book company, Milestone Comics, redolently memorialized his own readership experience of "Panther's Rage." In addition to calling the storyline "the most tightly-

written multipart superhero epic ever,” McDuffie echoed previous sentiments expressed in the letters pages of *Jungle Action* by stating:

It was 1973...The comic book was JUNGLE ACTION #6. It featured a superhero I’d never heard of called the Black Panther, but then, I’d never heard of the Black Panther political party either...What didn’t escape me was the powerful sense of dignity that the characters in this book possessed...[T]he Black Panther was king of a mythical African country where black people were visible in every position in society, soldier, doctor, philosopher, street sweeper, ambassador—suddenly everything was possible. In the space of 15 pages, black people moved from invisible to inevitable...I’ve spoken ad nauseam about the importance of multiculturalism in fiction, as in life. I’ve preached about the sense of validation a kid feels when they see their image reflected heroically in the mass media. This particular summer afternoon, reading about the dastardly (but nuanced) Eric Killmonger’s villainous plot to usurp the Black Panther’s rightful throne, is precisely when it happened to me. I realized that these stories could be about me, that I could be the hero. Years later writing in my own comic I’d describe that wonderful feeling as “the sudden possibility of flight.”⁶¹

McDuffie’s poignant comments underscore a point implicit in so many reader responses to the Black Panther: that much of the appeal of the Black Panther superhero lay in his ability to transport readers to Wakanda—a utopian, hidden territory within which readers could “gain the perspective to allow you to see the many possibilities open to you.”

Unlike readers of early versions of the Black Panther such as Guy Haughton who wished to abstract the superhero and his Blackness from his African homeland and import him to the U.S., McGregor's expansive imagination of Wakanda was the source of much of the Black Panther's power as a cultural icon. For many readers, Wakanda functioned as a surrogate, utopian vision of a powerful, Black organized, and separately determined state—the goal of many groups that fell under the generalized banner of the Black Power movement. Wakanda's technological and social progress rivaled (or even exceeded) that of the United States and offered a valuable affirmation that successful self-governance and community self-improvement were neither geographically nor culturally dependent. As such, McGregor's Wakanda provided readers a new frontier for experimentally imagining alternative possibilities for real world Black Power, and readers passionately valued such an opportunity, as evidenced by Meloney Crawford's insistence that "Wakanda must survive!"⁶² and Jana Hollingsworth's desperate plea for Kirby to "Please, please, don't abandon this real world to go careening throughout the universe. The real world is what is truly fascinating."⁶³

What emerges from a study of reader responses to Marvel's Black Panther is that the ability to occupy, explore, and map the magical land of Wakanda was not the exclusive right of the vibrant superheroes framed within the pages of each comic book. Rather, Wakanda existed materially in the medium of the comic book *itself*. Through the shared interaction between the various groups of writers and readers, the space of the comic book became a fertile ground for surveying the boundaries of sociocultural identity and expression. Instead of functioning solely as a self-indulgent and entirely fanciful distraction for avoiding the racial tensions of the 1960s and 1970s, the Black Panther offered a public space for actively engaging and collectively imagining new possibilities for representing race and power. In his examination of reader

responses to the first gay and lesbian superheroes, Morris E. Franklin III has noticed a similar ability for comic books to function as vehicles for collectively exploring politically contentious territories:

In the case of comic books, the reader has the potential to move from a position as an isolated individual, separate from the text, to part of a discourse community in the form of a letter column; the reader's ideas become part of the textual product itself. In this way, comic books can serve in the stories they tell and in the discussion of those stories as epistemology, a way of knowing about particular subjects, ideas, and opinions.⁶⁴

As such, the Black Panther storylines and letters pages became dynamic discursive spaces for authors and readers to safely assay new permutations of emerging African American power within the larger rhetorical context of Cold War superpowers.

In his preface to *Matters of Gravity: Special Effects and Superman in the 20th Century*, Scott Bukatman captured the liberatory powers of superhero comics through his observation that

All the fantasied escapes from gravity...[such as] Superman's flight across the skies of Metropolis, recall our bodies to us by momentarily allowing us to feel them differently. It is a momentary effect, a temporary high: we are always returned to ourselves. These escapes, however, are more than retreats from an intolerable existence, they are escapes *into* worlds of renewed possibility.⁶⁵

Superheroes are powerful precisely in their ability to transport their devotees into such "worlds of renewed possibility." It is through this creative ability to temporarily free their readers from

the otherwise intractable material constraints by drawing them into entirely new possibility spaces that the most important superhero comics artfully negotiate the fine line between escapism and hope. As resplendent lodestars on the vast, fluctuating horizon of the American cultural imaginary, superhero comics construct a path from frustrated desire to productive imagination that can most poetically be described by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's emancipatory conception of "lines of flight" or Dwayne McDuffie's equivalent evocation of the "sudden possibility of flight." It is through such creative escapism that superhero comics empower readers to experience imaginative heights that conventional configurations of social power never allow them to reach. Yet, as McDuffie has so eloquently indicated, the act of reaching can itself be transformative.

Notes:

¹ Editorial comment printed in Ed Hannigan and Jerry Bingham, "THE BEASTS IN THE JUNGLE," *Black Panther* 14 (New York: Marvel Comics, March 1979).

² Carmine Infantino, quoted in Saul Braun's "Shazam! Here Comes Captain Relevant," *New York Times Magazine* 2 May 1971, 33.

³ Tom Wolfe, *The Electric Kool-Aid Acid Test* (New York: Bantam Books, 1967), 39.

⁴ Braun, 38.

⁵ Wright, 223.

⁶ Les Daniels, *Comix: A History of Comic Books in America* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1971), 139.

⁷ "O.K., You Passed the 2-S Test—Now You're Smart Enough for Comic Books," *Esquire*, September 1966, 115.

⁸ Bobby Seale, speaking at the Chicago 7 trial, 1969. Quoted in Joseph V. Tirella, "toon black, toon strong," *Vibe* (Oct 1995), 102-6.

⁹ From a transcript of the testimony of William Frapolly in Professor Douglas O. Linder's online legal archive of the Chicago 7 trial (<http://www.law.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/frapolly/Chicago7/Frapolly.html>).

¹⁰ Bobby Seale, *Seize the Time: The Story of the Black Panther Party and Huey P. Newton* (New York: Random House, 1968), 292.

¹¹ Gil Scott-Heron and Brian Jackson, "Ain't No Such Thing as Superman," *The First Minutes of a New Day* (Arista Records, 1975).

¹² Omar Bilal, "Historical Overview," *The Museum of Black Superheroes* at <http://www.blacksupero.com/history.html>.

¹³ Mark Alexander, "Wah-Hoo!! Sgt. Fury and his Howling Commandos," posted online at <http://www.twomorrows.com/kirby/articles/24fury.html>.

¹⁴ Wright, 312n76.

¹⁵ Ponchitta Pierce, "What's Not Funny about the Funnies," *Ebony* 22 (November 1966), 48-56.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 50.

¹⁷ Charles Hardy, "A Brief History of Ethnicity in the Comics," from Charles Hardy and Gail Stern, *Ethnic Images in the Comics* (Philadelphia: Balch Institute for Ethnic Studies, 1986), posted online at <http://www.balchinstitute.org/museum/comics/brief.html>.

¹⁸ Jim Shooter, email interview (20 June 2002).

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- ¹⁹ Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, "THE WAY IT BEGAN..!" *Fantastic Four* 53 (New York: Marvel Comics, August 1966), 5.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 10.
- ²¹ Printed in Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, "KLaw: THE MURDEROUS MASTER OF SOUND," *Fantastic Four* 56 (New York: Marvel Comics, November 1966).
- ²² Printed in Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, "ENTER DR. DOOM!" *Fantastic Four* 57 (New York: Marvel Comics, December 1966).
- ²³ *Ibid.*
- ²⁴ Printed in Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, "DOOMSDAY!" *Fantastic Four* 59 (New York: Marvel Comics, February 1967).
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*
- ²⁶ Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, "THE WAY IT BEGAN..!" *Fantastic Four* 53 (New York: Marvel Comics, August 1966), 10.
- ²⁷ Printed in Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, "KLaw: THE MURDEROUS MASTER OF SOUND," *Fantastic Four* 56 (New York: Marvel Comics, November 1966). I attribute these early responses to Marvel in general rather than to Lee or Kirby because it is unlikely that either of them was actually responsible for responding to reader mail. In certain cases, however, writers and/or artists did respond to their own fan mail, as is the case with writers such as Don McGregor and Tony Isabella.
- ²⁸ Printed in Roy Thomas and John Buscema, "AND DELIVER US FROM THE MASTERS OF EVIL!" *Avengers* 54 (New York: Marvel Comics, July 1968).
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*
- ³⁰ *Ibid.*
- ³¹ Printed in Roy Thomas and John Buscema, "DEATH BE NOT PROUD!" *Avengers* 56 (New York: Marvel Comics, September 1968).
- ³² In arguing that Marvel purposely sought to avoid any unintended associations between the Black Panther and the Black Panther Party, I am opposing other interpretations that portray Marvel as desiring to exploit the press attention on the Black Panther Party through its creation of the Black Panther. For an example of this position, see Jeffrey A. Brown's *Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics, and Their Fans* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2001), in which Brown has rather anachronistically argued that "The character [of the Black Panther] was not overtly related to the Black Panther political movement, but Lee and Kirby had obviously been somewhat inspired by the organization, and at the very least the character's name was a hip reference to the struggles of black American culture" (19-20).
- ³³ Printed in Roy Thomas and John Buscema, "MAYHEM OVER MANHATTAN," *Avengers* 55 (New York: Marvel Comics, August 1968).
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.
- ³⁷ *Ibid.*, 18.
- ³⁸ Printed in Gerry Conway and Gene Colan, "BEHOLD...THE BROTHERHOOD!," *Daredevil* 73 (New York: Marvel Comics, February 1971).
- ³⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*
- ⁴¹ Printed in Roy Thomas and John Buscema, "LO! THE LETHAL LEGION!," *Avengers* 79 (New York: Marvel Comics, August 1970).
- ⁴² *Ibid.*
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁴⁶ Printed in Don McGregor, Gil Kane, and Klaus Janson, "BUT NOW THE SPEARS ARE BROKEN," *Jungle Action* 9 (New York: Marvel Comics, May 1974).
- ⁴⁷ Printed in Don McGregor, Billy Graham, and Klaus Janson, "KING CADEVER IS DEAD AND LIVING IN WAKANDA!," *Jungle Action* 10 (New York: Marvel Comics, July 1974).
- ⁴⁸ Printed in Don McGregor, Billy Graham, and Klaus Janson, "BLOOD STAINS ON VIRGIN SNOW!," *Jungle Action* 12 (New York: Marvel Comics, November 1974).
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁰ Printed in Don McGregor and Billy Graham, "THE GOD KILLER," *Jungle Action* 13 (New York: Marvel Comics, January 1975).
- ⁵¹ Printed in Don McGregor, Rich Buckler, and Keith Pollard, "WIND EAGLE IN FLIGHT!," *Jungle Action* 24 (New York: Marvel Comics, November 1976).
- ⁵² Jim Shooter, email interview (20 June 2002).
- ⁵³ Don McGregor, email interview (19 April 2001), currently posted online in Don McGregor's Yahoo discussion group at <http://groups.yahoo.com/group/donmcgregor/message/706>).

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- ⁵⁴ Printed in Jack Kirby, "KING SOLOMON'S FROG!," *Black Panther* 1 (New York: Marvel Comics, January 1977).
- ⁵⁵ Printed in Jack Kirby, "RACE AGAINST TIME!," *Black Panther* 3 (New York: Marvel Comics, May 1977).
- ⁵⁶ Ibid.
- ⁵⁷ Ibid.
- ⁵⁸ Printed in Jack Kirby, "DRUMS!," *Black Panther* 7 (New York: Marvel Comics, January 1978).
- ⁵⁹ Printed in Jack Kirby, "A CUP OF YOUTH," *Black Panther* 6 (New York: Marvel Comics, November 1977).
- ⁶⁰ Jim Shooter, email interview (11 July 2002).
- ⁶¹ Dwayne McDuffie, "To Be Continued #3," *Column Archives*, posted online at <http://homepage.mac.com/dmcduffie/site/TBC3.html>. "To Be Continued #3" first appeared on the Scifi Channel's "Psycomics" web site 1 October 1999. For an in-depth history of Dwayne McDuffie and Milestone Comics, see Jeffrey A. Brown's *Black Superheroes, Milestone Comics, and Their Fans* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2001).
- ⁶² Printed in McGregor, Graham, and Janson, "BLOOD STAINS ON VIRGIN SNOW!"
- ⁶³ Printed in Kirby, "RACE AGAINST TIME!"
- ⁶⁴ Morris E. Franklin, "Coming Out in Comics Books," *Comics & Ideology*, edited by Matthew McAllister, Edward Sewell, and Ian Gordon (New York: Peter Lang, 2001), 222.
- ⁶⁵ Scott Bukatman, *Matters of Gravity: Special Effects and Superman in the 20th Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), xiii.