

2018

T'Challa, The Black Panther: The Historical Accuracy of Institutionalized Racism and the Black Power Movement on the Pages of Marvel Comics

Grace Larkin

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.library.uab.edu/vulcan>



Part of the [History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Larkin, Grace (2018) "T'Challa, The Black Panther: The Historical Accuracy of Institutionalized Racism and the Black Power Movement on the Pages of Marvel Comics," *Vulcan Historical Review*. Vol. 22, Article 6. Available at: <https://digitalcommons.library.uab.edu/vulcan/vol22/iss2018/6>

This content has been accepted for inclusion by an authorized administrator of the UAB Digital Commons, and is provided as a free open access item. All inquiries regarding this item or the UAB Digital Commons should be directed to the [UAB Libraries Office of Scholarly Communication](#).

T'CHALLA, THE BLACK PANTHER: THE HISTORICAL ACCURACY OF INSTITUTIONALIZED RACISM AND THE BLACK POWER MOVEMENT ON THE PAGES OF MARVEL COMICS

by Grace Larkin

“Black men must unite to overthrow the White oppressor, but we must do it like the panther, smiling, cunning, scientifically - striking by night and sparing no one.”¹

TChalla, king of fictional yet futuristic Wakanda, rose to prominence in the 1960s and 1970s within American popular culture on the pages of Marvel Comics as the first black superhero. A hero aptly named the Black Panther, he serves as an icon of Black Power, embodying the movement's values and tactics. Graceful, lithe, and quick to act, the warrior-king of Wakanda fought to protect the weak, regardless of race. Several of his comic arcs feature him fighting for justice in the black community, whether it be in his home nation or amidst the down-trodden black neighborhoods of America. Mirroring historical events, the stories of the Black Panther reveal the deeply institutionalized racism, tension of interracial relations, and revolutionary culture of his contemporary era. His personality and sense of justice reflect historical persons, including that of Black Panther Party leader Huey P. Newton. After careful examination of these story arcs and the historical situation,

THE BLACK PANTHER CLEARLY EMBODIED BLACK POWER IDEALS IN SUCH AN ACCESSIBLE MANNER FOR MAINSTREAM AUDIENCES THAT HE TRIGGERED THE MASS INTRODUCTION OF NON-STEREOTYPICAL BLACK HEROES AND CHARACTERS WITHIN AMERICAN POPULAR CULTURE TO COMBAT THE INSTITUTIONALIZED RACISM OF THE COUNTRY.



*Stan Lee in 1975
Courtesy of Alan Light*

THE RISE OF THE BLACK PANTHER

In 1966, Marvel Comics' leader, Stan Lee, began to push for affirmative action on the hand drawn pages of his stories, and thus T'Challa was born. First featured in The Fantastic Four, Marvel writers quickly issued the Black Panther his own series in 1973 with Jungle Action #5,² a series that had previously been devoted to white imperialist

reprints from the 1950s.³ White proofreader, Don McGregor, despised the racist work that had crossed his desk, and when given the opportunity to take over as Jungle Action's writer, he reoriented the Black Panther within T'Challa's native homeland of Wakanda. Emphasizing the character's dignity and a political message of anti-racism, masculinity, and patriotism, McGregor worked closely with black illustration artist Billy Graham to produce "the only mainstream American comic book to feature an all-black cast."⁴ McGregor insisted on T'Challa's independence as a superhero, refusing to allow white superheroes to swoop in to save either T'Challa or the day in many issues. In the comic book run The Panther vs. The Klan (1976), the writer inserted himself vicariously into the Black Panther pages through the character of Kevin Trublood, a reporter warned

against criticizing the violent actions of the Ku Klux Klan in Georgia; Trublood represented McGregor's dedication to changing the racist conditions within America in whatever small way he could, even if doing so threatened his professional or personal reputation.⁵ Black representation mattered, even to white writers like McGregor, reflecting the cultural shift in the American mindset after the political gains of the struggle for black liberation.

Coincidentally timed with T'Challa's emergence in 1966, the Lowndes County Freedom Organization created a black panther logo only three months after the publication of the comic character, eventually developing into the Black Panther Party (BPP).⁶ As "black" eclipsed the term "Negro" in the American political consciousness, the rise of both the BPP and the Black Panther represented a shift in the political and cultural mindset of the nation in the wake of the classic phase of the civil rights movement. As the BPP's reputation became increasingly besmirched through the actions of COINTELPRO, media sensationalism, and individual members' crimes,⁷ Marvel sought to distance itself, and its hero, from the negative backlash from the American public concerning the Black Power movement. Stan Lee had happily widened his audience in the early 1960s with T'Challa, defending the character as more than a "token Negro",

BECAUSE HIS INTRODUCTION TO MAINSTREAM AUDIENCES ALLOWED FOR MARVEL TO INCLUDE MORE BLACK CHARACTERS TO CHALLENGE THE SHORTCOMINGS OF WHITE LIBERALISM AND THE FAILURE OF AMERICA TO PROTECT PART OF ITS POPULATION FROM THE HORRORS OF RACISM.⁸

The company's social commentary scaled back in the mid-1970s as the Black Panther Party passed

its zenith; T'Challa remarked to the Thing, "I neither condemn nor condone those who have taken up the name," leaving readers to decide whether the staff of Marvel Comics truly supported more radical Black Power tactics and movements.⁹

PANTHER PERSONALITY AND CULTURAL CONNECTIONS

Firstly, T'Challa's personality, role as warrior-knight, image, and home country warrant historical comparison. The sacred status and title of the Black Panther falls to the ruler of Wakanda, a small independent nation in northeast Africa. Within the comics, Wakandans understand the Black Panther as "a figurative God image...a sacred being—as the cow is venerated in India."¹⁰ Not only perceived as sacred to the way of Wakandan life, the Black Panther archetype can only be fulfilled by a learned man of the highest moral quality. T'Challa's story arcs portray him as a technologically advanced scientist, an idealist who protects the weak, and a fighter for justice for the oppressed of humanity. The pages detailing Wakanda heavily feature futuristic technology blended with African tradition, a sense of reverence for the protection of the local feline god and his embodiment as the Black Panther, and a third world status that regularly flouted white imperialists. "For Wakanda, black social agency is the fulcrum for their technological advancement,"¹¹ clearly denoting the effect of the Black Power movement's ideal of black agency and self-determination on popular culture. The word "wakanda" itself bears historical significance as well; in the belief structure of the Azande people of north central Africa, wakan or wakanda represents a disembodied, powerful supernatural force that "courses through all living things" and can be harnessed, directed, and used to achieve any goal.¹² This additional definition of Wakanda supports the concept of self-determination so fundamental to the Black Power movement, and the choice of Marvel writers to use the word may reveal a deepening of social commentary for a mainstream audience.

Everything about the conceptualization of Wakanda, from its distant, rural setting to its vastly advanced technology, flew directly in the face of seven decades of American representation of Africa as a backwards, tribal, racist, cartoony trope within mainstream media.¹³ The Black Panther himself also overpowers stereotypes, challenging the traditionally established discourse of Black Power. His presence in the scientific fiction genre offers a nonconventional option for black identity, challenging racist notions in his contemporary era. Arguably, T'Challa can be presented as one of many "social symbols...as ideological place-holders for variegated expressions of black racial identity and black futurism...for a more complex and unique expression of black racial identity."¹⁴ The development of black identity and ideology seemed integral to the success of the Black Power movement; Jim Crow historiography reveals a nasty tendency to lump African Americans, their values, and actions into a neat monolith, which academia now recognizes as categorically untrue. The Black Power movement sought to attack institutionalized and systematic racism through achievement of autonomy, political self-determination, and black identity at local, national, and international levels. It would be historically impossible and negligent to categorize such a massive movement with its constantly evolving variations as monolithic. T'Challa served as an approachable, non-stereotypical, black hero that challenged "essentialist notions of racial subjectivity... racial inequality and racial diversity, and contain[s] a considerable amount of commentary about the broader cultural politics of race in America and the world."¹⁵

T'Challa's idealism, black-and-white sense of justice, and messianic reputation can be compared to Huey P. Newton. Black Panther Party newspaper clippings feature interviews calling Newton a "black Jesus,"¹⁶ with a genuine concern for humanity,¹⁷ and the historical record speaks to the rigidity of the Black Panther Party's code of justice. The comparison of a Black Power activist to Jesus proves particularly

striking, as the May 1976 cover of *The Black Panther* showed T'Challa roped to a heavy wooden cross with captions pointing out his humanity:

He is not a symbolic Christ! Forget about turning his flesh and blood into some esoteric allusion to the persecution of contemporary man. This is the Black Panther...King of the Wakandas...also known as T'Challa. And he is made of flesh and blood. And the flames which consume the cross and his body prove his humanity. And the death-watchers, dressed in white robes, revel at his torment and desire his death!¹⁸

This depiction of the Black Panther reveals the brutality of racism within the United States, as well as pointing to the physically violent backlash suffered by black activists. The cover depicts not only the Ku Klux Klan, but what is undeniably an attempt to lynch the black superhero for his justice-based humanitarian actions. Like the highly educated and brilliant T'Challa, Huey P. Newton's intelligence and scholarship can be easily traced in the newspaper clippings, with several anecdotes of his educating the people around him in intellectual subjects such as leftist politics, economics, and the reality of Black Power. Newton and his party's advocacy of armed self-defense and militant attitude fostered the cultural significance needed to develop T'Challa's character.

Heightened to a supernatural level after the ingestion of a heart-shaped herb, his senses and physical abilities enable Black Panther to excel in all forms of combat; T'Challa's skills exhibited in the comics reveal a penchant for hand-to-hand combat, proficiency in guns, knives, and projectiles, and a willingness to go to extreme measures to achieve his goal. That dedication to a cause is arguably reminiscent of the Black Panther Party. The BPP members' advocacy for armed self-defense of their children, women, and neighborhoods through violent and extreme means reflects the tactics of the Black Panther. T'Challah also resorts to extreme means, often violently fighting, to protect his family, nation, and black communities he may be visiting. In *They*

Told Me a Myth I Wanted to Believe: The Panther vs. The Klan, Part II, T'challa and his girlfriend, Monica Lynne, travel to Georgia to investigate the suspicious death of her sister Angela only to discover that the Klan ruthlessly murdered Monica's sister to protect their financial interests. After learning that the Lynne family was considering speaking to both law enforcement and the press, the Klan sends assassins to dispatch Monica while at the grocery store; T'Challa leaps into action, quickly tossing the armed Klansmen through the aisles, destroying the stacks of food, beating them senseless within minutes.¹⁹ As a result, the white crowd around the couple panics, seeing him "as a threat, attacking their own, and they gather around him in vindictive fury. After all, it could have been them that he attacked."²⁰ His protective actions resulted in a pistol whipping from the police, a deep gash from an old lady gripping a can of cat food, and the Klan's placement of a bounty on the head of the Black Panther.²¹ The contemporary cultural depictions of racial tensions and Black Power values are apparent within the pages of the comic series.

Both the BPP and the Black Panther also have a meaningful uniform to serve as a physical reminder of black values. While the Black Panther Party stuck to an all-black ensemble complete with cocked beret, T'Challa prowled through the pages as a powerful figure, a tall, muscular black man clad in a skin-tight dark blue, nearly black, catsuit topped with small pointed ears. As heads turned for the Panthers' imposing uniform, the panels of the Black Panther show the attention garnered by his outfit; again in *They Told Me a Myth I Wanted to Believe: The Panther vs. The Klan, Part II*, T'challa draws the numerous hostile stares of white patrons as he grocery shops with his girlfriend.²² After his scuffle with knife-wielding executioners, the local sheriff remarks to Monica that her boyfriend's manner of dress discomforts the public, trying to lighten the situation by suggesting T'Challa switch to another color to be more appealing, jokingly referring to the Pink Panther.²³ A small panel hints at the contemporary era's media obsession

with the aesthetic of the Black Panther Party; the panel states that the small-town Georgia press loved the performance and "somber attire" of the Black Panther, snapping as many photos as possible before being shooed away by police.²⁴ Both the BPP and the Black Panther were immediately recognized by their uniforms, and thus their uniforms represented their values. The chosen uniform of the Panthers and of T'Challa inspired fear in their enemies and comfort in their constituency. The historical basis for such a character as the Black Panther may point to the Black Panther Party as an unconscious influence on the writers and artists at Marvel Comics.

INSTITUTIONALIZED RACISM BRED A FLAWED SYSTEM AND THE ALLOWANCE OF THE KU KLUX KLAN

The racist culture that birthed T'Challa as a character exists within the comics as well, but one must establish the existence of institutionalized violence, hatred, and racism before comparison. Several documents, including Black Panther Party newspaper clippings, multiple files on the activities of the Ku Klux Klan (KKK) from the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the U.S. Information Agency, and the NAACP, and a CORE report on interracial violence clearly indicate cultural conditions that would later generate the Black Power movement. The degree of historical accuracy in *The Black Panther* series concerning the KKK denotes a culture of institutionalized racism and fear, in which black communities needed heroes and role models, and the Black Panther rose to the forefront as just what his people needed.

The CORE report spanning from 1963-1965 reveals the scale of white on black killings in the southern region of the United States. A cursory glance leaves the historical reader appalled. The details of the report display a blatant disregard for black life, with the killings including men, women, and children; five out of twenty-two of the incidents listed on the report involved the severe maiming or disfigurement of the

victim(s) before being murdered. With a motivation of hatred for civil rights activism or simply pure racism, the thirty cases of murder by whites resulted in less than 25% of arrests, and absolutely no cases resulted in convictions.²⁵

When victimized, T'Challa and Monica Lynne also experience the corruption of the justice system firsthand. After being assaulted by another subversive group while visiting the Lynne family plot, the local sheriff identifies the perpetrators as “local boys... which don't give 'em no special lea-way like they might think.”²⁶ They immediately posted bail and disappear without further investigation or convictions. After being kidnapped by the KKK, beaten to a pulp with baseball bats and crowbars, lashed to a cross and set aflame, T'Challa drags himself to safety and subsequently the hospital.²⁷ True to his determined nature and despite lying prone in a hospital bed, the Black Panther insists on attending a Klan rally the following evening. Immediately, the sheriff leaps to the defense of the Klan:

Now waitaminnit, you two! I don't want you goin' in there bustin' things up. They got themselves a permit, you got that? Now I'm not sayin' there's a law that can stop you from going down there...but you are surely gonna stir up a hornet's nest—and I'd'a thought you got stung enough already! Well, either way I've had enough of that! You break the law, you know what I'll do with your carcasses!²⁸

The sheriff's threat does nothing to deter T'Challa, but it reveals a sense of the contemporary era's trend of victim-blaming and quit-whilst-ahead attitude aimed at black activists. Clearly, the judicial deck had been stacked against the black community, and the CORE report points to institutional racism depicted in the pages written by Marvel.

The development of a racist culture can be evidenced in the larger files from CORE and the U.S. Information Agency as well. The white extremist view of the civil rights movement created

a motive for violence. Directed to President Lyndon Johnson, a letter from the Georgia branch of the Klan threateningly insists that he (and thus the federal government), as well as “the Left Wing News Media, the N.A.A.C.P., C.O.R.E. and all of the other Communistic and Socialistic rabble rousers”²⁹ will never be able to destroy the Klan. The letter continues to say that the hate group will “fight with every means at our [their] disposal, at the Ballot Box, in the Swamps, or in the Hills...for we shall never surrender.”³⁰ The Black Panther faces off against the Klan in more than one issue in the mid 1970s, which reveals the historical significance of racial tensions represented in the comic medium.

“COMIC BOOK READERS HAD SEEN THE KLAN LITERALLY FIGHT THE BLACK PANTHER IN THE SWAMPS AND THE HILLS, AND DIALOGUE MIMICS THE HISTORICAL DOCUMENTATION OF THE KKK'S INTENTIONS OF FIGHTING FOR THE FUTURE OF WHITE CHILDREN, WHITE JOBS, AND TRUE REPRESENTATION IN GOVERNMENT.”

Comic book readers had seen the Klan literally fight the Black Panther in the swamps and the hills, and dialogue mimics the historical documentation of the KKK's intentions of fighting for the future of white children, white jobs, and true representation in government.³¹ A specific panel denotes the Klan's view on the federal government, stating that the country

was controlled by “anti-Christ Jews who brand the Klan with images of slaughtering the supposedly oppressed black man.”³² The comic also accurately depicts the hierarchy, member demographics, and recruitment tactics of the Klan.³³ Further government pages on the Klan reveal that they “struck by night”³⁴ and infiltrated various levels of law enforcement and civic businesses, leading to the failure to relieve racial tensions, extreme citizen violence, and police brutality³⁵ in Atlanta, Georgia; T’Challa faces the Klan at night, and Sheriff Tate’s actions imply Klan infiltration into the local police and businesses. A description of the Klan’s tactics, such as mutilation, beatings, and cross-burning,³⁶ remain easily identifiable upon the pages of *The Black Panther*.³⁷

T’CHALLA’S LEGACY

Through careful examination of primary sources and the comparison of fiction to history, the pages of Marvel Comics’ *The Black Panther* denote the various nuances of the reality of 1960s–70s culture, politics, and racial tensions. T’Challa, the Black Panther, served as the first black superhero, one who fought for the oppressed regardless of race. Seemingly based on a synthesis of anti-racism and Black Power ideals, the comic character resembled historical figures and reiterated the motions of historical events. The Black Panther continues to claw justice from the flawed American system in modern settings. Black activist, journalist, and son of a Black Panther Party Member,³⁸ Ta-Nehisi Coates currently writes *The Black Panther* comics³⁹ to continue the powerful message of Black Power, and thus empowerment.

1 “Folder OO1566-003-0888 Complaints regarding double standards of justice in the South and U.S. economic conditions, Martin Luther King, Jr.’s visits to slum areas in Atlanta, Georgia, and voter registration campaigns in Birmingham, Alabama and Jefferson County, Alabama, Publications, February 1966,” 3.

2 Les Daniels, *Marvel: Five Fabulous Decades of the World’s Greatest Comics* (New York, NY: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1993), 158.

3 Sean Howe, *Marvel Comics: The Untold Story* (New York, NY: Harper Perennial, 2013), 132.

4 *Ibid.*, 133.

5 *Ibid.*, 180.

6 *Ibid.*, 85.

7 Joshua Bloom and Waldo E. Martin, Jr., *Black Against Empire: The History and Politics of the Black Panther Party* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2016), 390–416.

8 Howe, *Marvel Comics: The Untold Story*, 97.

9 *Ibid.*, 133.

10 Don McGregor and Stan Lee, *Black Panther Epic Collection: Panther’s Rage* (New York: Marvel

Worldwide, Inc., 2016), 33.

11 Adilifu Nama, “Brave Black Worlds: Black Superheroes as Science Fiction Ciphers,” in *The Black Imagination: Science Fiction, Futurism, and the Speculative*, ed. Sandra Jackson and Julie E. Moody-Freeman (Germany: Peter Lang Inc., International Academic Publishers, 2011), 37.

12 H. Philsooph, “Primitive Magic and Mana,” *Man* 6, no. 2 (June 1971): 197–199, accessed February 11, 2017, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2798261>.

13 Nama, “Brave Black Worlds: Black Superheroes as Science Fiction Ciphers,” 37.

14 *Ibid.*, 35.

15 *Ibid.*, 36.

16 “Folder O10629-008-0973 Black Panther Party, Newspaper Clippings, 1966–1969,” *The Black Power Movement: Papers of the Revolutionary Action Movement, 1962–1996. Series 7, Related Black Power Organizations, 1962–1999. Personal Papers: Papers of RAM founder and National Field Chairman Muhammad Ahmad and of RAM members John H. Bracey Jr. and Ernie Allen Jr.* Accessed April 10, 2017. <http://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=O10629-008-0973>. 6.

17 *Ibid.*, 7.

- 18 McGregor and Lee, Black Panther Epic Collection: Panther's Rage, 315.
- 19 McGregor and Lee, Black Panther Epic Collection: Panther's Rage, 298.
- 20 Ibid., 301.
- 21 Ibid., 298-312.
- 22 Ibid., 296.
- 23 Ibid., 303.
- 24 Ibid., 304.
- 25 "Folder: 252252-002-0140 Interracial killings, James Farmer correspondence files," Congress of Racial Equality Papers, Addendum, 1945-1968. Subgroup A. National Directors' Files, 1960-1968, Series I. James Farmer, 1960-1966, Correspondence Files, 1960-1966. Congress of Racial Equality Papers, Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Inc., Atlanta, Georgia. Accessed April 1, 2017. <http://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=252252-002-0140>. 1.
- 26 McGregor and Lee, Black Panther Epic Collection: Panther's Rage, 288.
- 27 Ibid., 306-322
- 28 Ibid., 323.
- 29 "Folder: 009056-016-0484 Ku Klux Klan activities," Series A. Group IV, Series A, Administrative File, General Office File. NAACP, Library of Congress, 2014. Accessed April 1, 2017. <http://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=009056-016-0484>. 11.
- 30 Ibid.
- 31 McGregor and Lee, Black Panther Epic Collection: Panther's Rage, 326-327.
- 32 Ibid., 327.
- 33 "Folder 252252-008-0751 Ku Klux Klan, files of the Associate National Director," Congress of Racial Equality Papers, Addendum, 1944-1968. Subgroup B. Associate National Director's Files, 1960-1966. Congress of Racial Equality Papers, Martin Luther King, Jr. Center for Nonviolent Social Change, Inc., Atlanta, Georgia. Accessed April 10, 2017. <http://congressional.proquest.com/histvault?q=252252-008-0751>. 11, 17.
- 34 Ibid., 2.
- 35 Ibid., 4
- 36 Ibid. 6-10
- 37 McGregor and Lee, Black Panther Epic Collection: Panther's Rage, 306-312.
- 38 Lynell George, "Lessons from Dad: A memoir pays tribute to an ex-Black Panther and the struggles of young black men," accessed April 1, 2017, <http://articles.latimes.com/2008/jul/09/entertainment/et-coates9>.
- 39 George Gene Gustines, "Ta-Nehisi Coates on Creating Black Superheroes," New York Times, March 2, 2017, accessed April 1, 2017, https://www.nytimes.com/2017/03/02/fashion/mensstyle/ta-nehisi-coates-marvel-comics-black-panther-between-the-world-and-me.html?_r=0.