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Racism, Black Identity and Historical Trauma – an Analysis of Marvel's Comic Book Series "*The Panther v. The Klan*"

Abstract. Black Panther is a character created by the Marvel Comics publishing house in 1966, widely recognized as the first black superhero of mainstream American pop culture. This thesis examines the revolutionary significance of Black Panther to American society through an analysis of his first stories, with a particular focus on the storyline of *"The Panther v. The Klan"* (1976). The object of the research of this paper is to demonstrate the deeper message and relevant socio-political issues of the 1970s, also reflected in the present day, in selected comic strips from Don McGregor's *"Jungle Action"* series. The purpose of this paper is to examine the significance of Black Panther for American pop culture in the context of racism, black identity, and historical trauma. To achieve it, the following paper subjects primary sources, in this case, four comic book issues, as well as other available cultural texts, to critical analysis consistent with the methodology in qualitative terms. The study demonstrated the timelessness of the subject matter analyzed and confirmed the role of the Black Panther as a political symbol.

Keywords: pop culture, comic, race

1. Introduction

By the late 1960s, the Black Power movement emerged in the United States, emphasizing racial pride and black institutions to advance black interests and values. Despite the end of the Jim Crow era and the achievements of the civil rights movement, such as the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act of the mid-1960s, institutional racism persisted in the American political and social landscape. The authors of *"How to Get*

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Away with Colour: Colour-Blindness and the Myth of a Postracial America in American Television Series" reference Bonilla-Silva's compelling theory on the evolving characteristics of racism in the United States. Bonilla-Silva noted that in the 1970s, a new racial ideology emerged, shifting focus from institutional racism to individual actions towards racial minorities. Consequently, despite increased professional opportunities and a somewhat easier path to success for black individuals, white citizens continued to dominate societal ideology, as evidenced by pervasive double standards across multiple levels (Martens and Povoa, 2017: 117-134). In the 1970s, American popular culture increasingly reflected the national currents of change. Black characters began to receive more screen time, more roles in cinema, and greater representation in comic books. The prevailing white ideology, perpetuating harmful stereotypes, entrenched racism within the collective subconscious of media audiences. These stereotypes often depicted black characters as inferior to white characters, with recurring archetypes like the "Mammy", "Sambo", or "Brutal Buck", as identified by Siobhan E. Smith (2021: 1-11).

In the 1950s and 1960s, producers often excluded black characters to avoid controversy. The 1970s witnessed the emergence of the first sitcoms that showcased black communities (e.g. *"Julia", "Sanford and son"*). Although these productions symbolized incremental change, their portrayal of black experiences represented a crucial step forward for future generations of black communities in the United States.

The influence of the Black Power movement extended to the cinematic landscape of Los Angeles, albeit with a slower pace of change. While some black characters assumed leading roles, aspirations of eliminating entrenched stereotypes were tempered by the emergence of new ones. Traditional archetypes were replaced by depictions of gangsters, drug dealers, and promiscuous women. During the 1970s, Blaxploitation emerged as one of the most prominent film categories. While some regarded it as groundbreaking, others criticized it for glorifying violence, hypersexualizing women, and containing elements of exploitation. It has been suggested that Hollywood, predominantly governed by white filmmakers, may have hesitated to depict the realities of black communities, fearing it could undermine the idealized white myth of the American Dream (Grant, 2004).

2. The depiction of black characters in American comics during the 1970s

The comic book, an American cultural phenomenon, reflects over 90 years of U.S. societal developments. Originating from the "yellow press" and humorous newspaper narratives, comics rose to prominence in the 1930s. The debut of Superman in *"Action Comics #1"* in 1938 marked the onset of the Golden Age of comics, extending until the 1950s. This era saw the rise of new superheroes embodying American values, including the Flash, Green Lantern, and Batman. Timely Publications, later Marvel Comics,

introduced heroes like Captain America, adorned in the colors of the American flag. During its formative decades, the comic book industry, akin to its cinematic counterparts, was predominantly influenced by individuals fitting the demographic profile of white, heterosexual males. This, in turn, led to overrepresentation of white men in comic books (Facciani, Warren, Vendemia, 2015: 225). It can be posited that the conception of whiteness became intrinsic to the earliest superheroes, emblematic of the prevailing American ethos, thereby evolving into enduring figures within pop culture mythology.

Among the early portrayals of black characters, there were notable references to the institution of slavery or minstrelsy, often presented in a manner intended to trivialize or render it humorous. During World War II, there was an increase in their representation, attributed to the demand for African Americans in the U.S. military at the time. During the 1940s, black characters in comic books transitioned from peripheral roles to more prominent positions, exemplified by the milestone publication of *"All-Negro Comics"* in 1947, the first comic book entirely created by African-American creators (Hartsell, 2017). During the 1950s, a distinct genre of Jungle Comics surfaced. Within these stories, indigenous characters were often depicted as reliant on guidance and aid from white "civilized" Western societies, implicitly evoking parallels to the historical dynamics between slaves and their owners (Woodall, 2010: 47). Characters such as Tarzan and Sheena, Queen of the Jungle, assumed a role as saviors for the other inhabitants of the jungle.

Since the mid-1960s, there has been a notable trend toward endowing characters with more realistic and nuanced human personalities (Centeno, 2020). Narratives infused with heightened political or social commentary gained acceptance within the publishing realm, affording minority heroes greater prominence within the comic book landscape. Notably, in 1963, the creators of *"X-Men"* employed the notion of otherness inherent in the characters to draw parallels to the treatment of race and sexual orientation within American society. Numerous scholars draw comparisons between comic book heroes and real-life figures of the civil rights era, such as Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X (Smart, 2016).

In the 1970s, American comic book publishers influenced by the Blaxploitation film era, created Luke Cage, the first black superhero to headline his comic book series. Dawid Przywalny highlights an insightful observation by Adilifu Nama: "In contrast to Black Panther, symbolizing the life of Blacks without the influence of racism, Luke Cage is its direct consequence" (Przywalny, 2016: 56). The 1970s comic book narratives initiated broader discussions on equality but often addressed entrenched issues superficially, reinforcing black stereotypes and suggesting that only black superheroes could resolve black issues. These characters faced the dual challenge of advocating for equal rights while avoiding one-dimensional racial tokenism.

3. The Black Panther

In 1966, the issue of *"Fantastic Four #52"* introduced Black Panther, widely regarded as the first black superhero in mainstream American pop culture, created by Jack Kirby and Stan Lee. The creators did not foresee the inadvertent political associations that would arise with the Black Power movement, which emerged contemporaneously. Any suggestions of the comic's affiliation with this political organization or the revolutionary party of the same name are unfounded.

The character, also known as T'Challa, is the sovereign of Wakanda, a fictional African nation characterized by its harmonious integration of advanced technology and rich cultural heritage. It represented a utopian vision of a sovereign African realm, existing independently of the historical contexts of slavery in the United States and European colonialism. The narrative consistently highlights T'Challa's exceptional intelligence and strategic acumen, positioning him as a significant departure from the "Brutal Buck" stereotype and the prevalent emphasis on hyper-masculinity. Despite this progressive portrayal, T'Challa is often treated dismissively, illustrating the persistent reproduction of stereotypes about the otherness of black individuals. The character did not get his series until 1977, and his solo titles were frequently cancelled, highlighting the challenges of maintaining a consistent, independent narrative for the character. Many viewers erroneously perceived T'Challa as African-American, when in fact, he is of African descent (Stringfield, 2017: 20). This misconception likely stemmed from T'Challa's identity, which has consistently straddled the line between African and American cultural elements, primarily due to the varying interpretations of successive writers. Additionally, the character faced criticism for early iterations resembling Blaxploitation film characters.

It is arguable that while Black Panther's characterization was radically novel for white audiences, it may have lacked sufficient authenticity and relatability for racial minority readers (Woodall, 2010: 154). Upon his integration into the Avengers, numerous fans voiced accusations against the creators, asserting that the character's narrative trajectory within the series resulted in an excessive "Americanization" thereof. Matthew Sautman, in his analysis, underscores that T'Challa's initial adventures diverged significantly from liberal narratives (Sautman, 2021: 15).

In 1973, T'Challa received his first solo series within *"Jungle Action"* under Don McGregor's supervision. In an interview with Alex Grand and Jim Thompson, McGregor acknowledged that he was assigned the series due to its poor market sales (Grand and Thompson, 2020). His efforts endowed Black Panther with significant political relevance, transforming the character from a mere symbol into a substantive figure. However, as Matthew Sautman rightfully notes, the absence of white characters limited the series' ability to confront white American audiences with the realities of racism (Sautman, 2021: 16).

"Jungle Action #19" (1976) initiates a new storyline, transitioning Black Panther from Wakanda to Georgia in the Deep South. T'Challa returns to America with his

girlfriend Monica Lynne, a black U.S. citizen, for her sister Angela's funeral. The complexity of her death soon becomes apparent, drawing Black Panther into a conflict with the Ku Klux Klan and its factions. The new storyline was inspired by contemporary events. In the referenced interview, McGregor explains: „The Klan was on an insurgence in various states in the union" (Grand and Thompson, 2020). To avoid a lawsuit, the author refrained from using actual names.

Shawn Lay, in the New Georgia Encyclopedia, reports that the Ku Klux Klan was a "secret society dedicated to white supremacy" founded shortly after the Civil War. Their activities were suppressed in the late 1860s by the Federal Bureau of Investigation (Lay, 2005). The resurgence of the Ku Klux Klan in the U.S. South coincided with the socio-political shifts of the 1970s, notably in Georgia. Embracing violence as a tactic, the group experienced heightened engagement, resorting to force when intimidation proved insufficient (Chalmers, 1987: 2). Bombings, burnings at the stake, lynchings, and beatings constituted typical manifestations of their actions.

4. The Panther v. The Klan

An article, accessible on the official Marvel Comics publishing site, highlights *"The Panther v The Klan"* as one of the fourteen exemplary stories featuring the Black Panther (Marvel, 2019). The narrative, commencing in issue #19 of the *"Jungle Action"* series, is widely regarded as symbolically inaugurating a new chapter for the transformative Black Panther character. Jungle motifs persist prominently from issue #6 to #18 of *"Jungle Action"*. The cover of *"Jungle Action #19"*, depicts Wakanda's ruler confronting hooded, white-robed figures with knives. Intriguingly, the image is captioned: "In the heart of civilization, T'Challa battles the primitive power of The Clan!" (Jungle Action, 1976). Conversely, the initial page of the comic bears the title *"The Panther v. the Klan"*, employing an alternate spelling of the word "clan", reminiscent of marketing strategies prevalent in earlier decades of the comic book industry. This tactic likely aimed to mitigate political connotations or evoke controversy among the American audience. Concerning the depiction of this "fictional" rendition of the Klan, it closely mirrors reality. The iconic white robes and hooded disguises concealing the members' identities remain unchanged, albeit with the omission of the cross symbol from their attire.

The narrative commences with Monica Lynne's pilgrimage to her sister's gravesite. In the opening sequences, she attracts the attention not only of T'Challa but also of individuals garbed in blue and purple robes with hooded ensembles, promptly initiating a calculated assault on her. According to historical records, members of the Ku Klux Klan organization typically comprised white Anglo-Saxon Protestants. Through deductive reasoning, it becomes apparent that the black assailants belong to a faction later identified as The Dragon Circle. In *"The FBI and the KKK: The Critical History"* Michael Newton (2015: 5) mentions, that the Ku Klux Klan established, that each state would be

ruled by a 'Grand Dragon'. Therefore, it does not seem impossible that a fictional faction of the Klan was deliberately named in a comic book in reference to this post.

During a visit to the police precinct to seek justice, Black Panther engages in a contentious exchange with the officers. This scene poignantly comments on the issue of law enforcement ignorance. Frighteningly, despite the passage of time, the issue is still relevant today.

The protagonists of the comic encounter another assault while residing at the Lynne family residence. In a particular panel, Monica reflects on her father's fondness for card games, the only ones he felt he could win. This sentiment alludes to the enduring struggle faced by previous generations of black individuals and underscores the lasting repercussions of colonialism and slavery. On pages 13-14, The Dragon Circle and the Clan attack Angela's family with rocks, firearms, and Molotov cocktails. The authors infuse the scene with political and social significance, with McGregor depicting Klan members as embodiments of the psychological impact of white supremacy on the black community. These individuals fervently pursue their perceived "sanctioned mission" at any cost. The comic's author portrays a radical fervor and allegiance akin to the actual Ku Klux Klan's mission to "cleanse" American society. Conversely, the Black Panther is consistently labeled as a "demon" or "devil", suggesting a substitution of derogatory terms historically used to denigrate black individuals.

The opening scenes of *"Jungle Action #20"*, featuring Monica and T'Challa grocery shopping, initially appear mundane; however, the comic subtly delves into numerous problematic facets concerning the treatment of black citizens in the United States. Black Panther consistently encounters hostility from white residents of Georgia, while Monica elucidates how Georgia's extensive history of discrimination has fostered enduring supremacist ideologies. Notably, even after enduring decades of segregation and humiliation, black characters such as the elderly couple Lynne initially harbor skepticism towards T'Challa, doubting the abilities of the black superhero to effect empowerment. This was also a reference to the actual perception of this character by black audiences. Subsequent scenes show Black Panther defending Monica from Klan members, but when the police arrive, they unjustly attack him. The crowd assembled also supports the officers' brutal behavior. The injury inflicted by one of the officers upon the Black Panther may not be severe in physical terms, but its lasting imprint on the collective black identity will endure indefinitely. Monica critiques the American public's indifference, referencing the tragic tale of a student who perished during the 1968 riots, underscoring the historical context of protests during the civil rights movement, which, though often peaceful, tragically culminated in bloodshed due to the ruthless reactions of law enforcement.

In the concluding installment of *"Jungle Action #20"*, a starkly dichotomous sequence unfolds, emblematic of divergent facets characterizing the American landscape. Idealistic white reporter, Kevin Trublood, noted for his opposition to racism, undertakes an examination of his ambivalent sentiments towards his nation. "I believe in the myths [...], in the values that this country was supposed to stand for" (Jungle Action #20, 1976).

Myths, in this context, ought to be comprehended as quintessential components of the American national identity. Trublood emerges as a symbol of American idealism, actively championing the pursuit of freedom and equality enshrined in the US Constitution. However, he is portrayed with a nuanced awareness of the arduous path required to realize these ideals fully. McGregor, recognized for his anti-racist stance and his commitment to its propagation, appears to have imbued his storytelling with a didactic purpose, urging readers to introspect on their values through the character of Trublood. Concurrently, Black Panther engages in a fervent confrontation with Klan members, with McGregor underscoring the dehumanizing nature of the hooded adversaries. The deliberate choice of imagery and language by the authors serves to transmute T'Challa into a symbol representative of all black individuals who have endured the hegemony of white supremacy. Thus, a singular image multiplies into myriad iterations, as generations of enslaved and marginalized African Americans are figuratively transposed into the persona of the Black Panther. The hero evolves into the embodiment of their collective anguish stemming from historical traumas and systemic racism.

In superhero narratives, characters enduring torture is not uncommon. However, Black Panther being affixed to a burning cross carries profound significance due to its contextual layers. In accordance with historical facts, cross-burning has been used as a form of intimidation against African Americans by the members of the Klan. Despite the absence of overt manifestations of T'Challa's anguish, the initial segment of issue #21 unequivocally exposes the character to extreme suffering, rendering it a portrayal that diverges from conventional depictions found within mainstream pop culture. As noted by Anna F. Peppard, numerous portrayals depict T'Challa as subjected to enslavement (Peppard, 2018: 72). However, rather than perpetuating the historical traumas endured by black communities, this depiction initiates a narrative trajectory where the protagonist adopts a militant stance, thereby transcending the confines of victimhood. T'Challa's resistance manifests silently, drawing solely upon his innate animalistic attributes. Particularly notable is the profound tone set on the comic's opening page. „He is not the symbolic Christ! [...] And the flames that consume the cross and his body prove his humanity" (Jungle Action #21, 1976). McGregor ardently endeavors to delineate a distinction between the symbolic Jesus figure and the suffering black man throughout the narrative. This sequence prompts Monica to question the humanity of the Klan members, thereby reframing the narrative dynamics established in the opening pages.

Swiftly resuming his heroic pursuits, Black Panther and his allies disrupt a Klan recruitment gathering. The audacity of a member proposing Klan representation within the US government underscores the narrative's socio-political commentary, mirroring the historical reality of the Ku Klux Klan's influence in American politics. In the 1970s, covert sympathizers often held positions of power or worked through allied politicians. Some of the research papers also state that several law enforcement officers, like FBI agents, helped in suppressing evidence of violent crimes. Despite the passage of time, contemporarily, there are still small groups or individuals, following Klan's ideology and attempting to exploit systems of governance (Newton, 2007).

The issue culminates with Mr. Lynne shielding Panther from harm, inspired by T'Challa's valor and Kevin Trublood's rhetoric, reigniting his activism. This act could also be interpreted as a motivation for the black readers, who at the time, may still have taken a passive stance in fighting for their rights.

Unlike preceding installments, *"Jungle Action #22"* features a flashback to 1867, narrated by Ms. Lynne. The narrative unfolds in dual perspectives: one portrays the actual historical events, while the other emerges as a product of Monica's imagination, envisioning alternate outcomes where the tragic events are averted through Black Panther's intervention. "The Civil War liberated Caleb, yet left him adrift, devoid of a place to call home..." initiates the narrative recounted by Ms. Lynne (Jungle Action #22, 1976: 1). After emancipation in 1865, formerly enslaved African-Americans in the South faced significant challenges in rebuilding their lives. With limited financial resources and education, they struggled to navigate their new existence. The optimistic Reconstruction era quickly ended, replaced by Jim Crow laws institutionalizing racial segregation and the rise of politically and racially motivated groups like the Ku Klux Klan. As Caleb discerns the approach of Klan riders, fear overtakes him, prompting him to instruct his family to seek refuge. Monica imagines a divergent narrative, envisioning Caleb prepared to defend his newfound freedom. In reality, Caleb, still influenced by the submissiveness of his former enslaved status, cowers before the Klan leader, Soul Strangler, who derogatorily addresses him as "Nigra". In Monica's version, Caleb refuses to be intimidated, leading to Black Panther's intervention.

In the following scenes, Caleb presents himself to the institution commonly known as the Freedmen's Bureau. Established in 1865, Congress enacted legislation to create the Freedmen's and Refugee Relief Bureau, outlining its various functions and responsibilities. According to the official U.S. Senate website, „the Freedmen's Bureau was to operate 'during the present war of rebellion, and for one year thereafter', and also […], supervised contracts between freedmen and employers" (Senate Historical Office, 2023). Despite its initial one-year mandate, Congress extended the agency's tenure. In *"Jungle Action #22"*, agency portrayal is decidedly critical, with the author suggesting it served politicians' interests more than those of African Americans. When Caleb seeks assistance, he encounters only hollow assurances. Conversely, in Monica's narrative, Black Panther emerges as a proactive force, confronting adversaries and rallying Caleb, serving as a call to action against racism. The succeeding panels inexorably lead toward the narrative's tragic denouement. While Monica steadfastly eschews acknowledging the historical reality, in actuality, a contingent of Civil War-era Confederate soldiers, led by Soul Strangler, confronts Caleb. Depicting Klan members in this way was a reference to the pranks aimed at former slaves whom Klansmen terrorized by pretending to be the ghosts of Confederate war dead (Newton, 2015: 3). Within Monica's imaginative rendition, Black Panther engages in combat against the emblematic leader of the Klan, deftly parrying his verbal affronts and physical assaults. The hero's objective is to embody the resilience of black identity and solidarity within the black community in defiance of the pernicious forces of white supremacy. In the concluding sequences, Soul Strangler en-

snares the black man with a rope around his neck, and in a desperate attempt to intervene, his wife Ellie is felled by a violent blow. The Klan proceeds to hang Caleb from a tree, as his anguished family, rendered captive by circumstance, bears witness to the unfolding horror. This depiction, though starkly inhumane, serves as a poignant reflection of the harrowing realities endured by numerous African American families during this historical epoch. Ellie undergoes a profound disillusionment regarding the prospects of reconstructing her life in the aftermath of slavery, cognizant that the road ahead holds little promise of benevolence. In Monica's reimagined scenario, she envisions Black Panther, emblematic of the Black Power movement, assuming Caleb's position and orchestrating the villain's defeat with resolute efficiency.

The central figures in the narrative arc of *"The Panther v. The Klan"* exemplify varied responses to the pervasive issue of racism. Scholars delineate distinct groupings within the storyline. The first group comprises the elder members of the Lynne family, including Monica's parents and Caleb. Termed the "old response" by the authors, their conduct is characterized by a subdued acquiescence and a profound internalization of anxiety. Having come of age amidst the backdrop of Jim Crow laws and the tumultuous civil rights movements of the 1950s and 1960s, their reactions reflect the entrenched societal norms and systemic injustices of their era. In contrast to the relatively passive dispositions of the elder characters, McGregor positions Monica Lynne and T'Challa as protagonists embodying assertive responses to racial injustice. The authors underscore elements of black nationalism and highlight the characters' commitment to self-defense. It is noteworthy that this defense strategy does not solely rely on physical prowess but also encompasses the potency of their rhetoric. According to scholars, such assertive attitudes began to gradually emerge in the late 1960s (Buchanan, Alcime, and Morrison, 2020: 106-108). Monica's reinterpretation of history represents a deliberate reimagining, crafting a new mythology characterized by simplified narratives. This dichotomy in the portrayal of ex-slave history serves the dual purpose of confronting divergent attitudes among African Americans towards past traumas and an uncertain future. Concurrently, it serves to embolden civil rights activists advocating for more proactive measures. The creators adeptly integrate a portrayal of governmental apathy towards the promises of a brighter future, while also highlighting the absence of a cohesive and empowered black community, which appears indispensable for effectively challenging entrenched white racism.

The majority of scholars specializing in comic book history recognize issues #19 to #24 as constituting the definitive narrative arc known as *"The Panther v. The Klan"*. However, owing to its limited thematic linkage to the multifaceted issues explored in preceding installments, *"Jungle Action #22"* is often regarded as an epilogue to the overarching storyline. After 24 issues, the series abruptly ended. Speculation suggests that McGregor's unvarnished portrayal of Black Panther may not have resonated with the prevailing white audience demographic in the comics industry, possibly contributing to the series' premature termination. Following this, the newly minted Black Panther was granted its standalone title just two months later, featuring a total of 13

issues scripted and illustrated by Jack Kirby. The creator aimed to elevate T'Challa's prominence by revitalizing typical superhero action. Subsequent installments tried to conclude McGregor's narrative but lacked his raw authenticity, resulting in limited attention. Eventually, in the 1990s, the mantle of the African hero was assumed by screenwriter Christopher Priest, marking a historic milestone as the first full-time black screenwriter in the realm of publishing.

"The Panther v. The Klan" series is often described as audacious and contentious, yet its recognition remains limited in contemporary times due to modest sales figures and its marginal status within popular culture. In the 1970s, discussions of racial themes were not as prevalent in mainstream media, rendering the series' exploration of such issues particularly daring. It drew criticism from audiences who found its subject matter confrontational and discomforting. Furthermore, detractors accused the comic's author of leveraging the narrative solely to elicit sympathy and induce feelings of shame among white readers, which may have contributed to readers' reluctance to engage with such complex themes in a medium typically associated with leisure and escapism. Nonetheless, as asserted by Professor Lowery A. Woodall, "In many ways, it was one of the most profound works of literature that any comic book publisher dared to publish at the time" (Woodall, 2010: 180). Despite its imperfections, the series stands as a testament to the rarity of white creators daring to critique the flaws inherent within the American system.

5. Conclusions

A well-crafted superhero character possesses the capacity to embody the archetype of the "Everyman", thereby prompting individuals to undertake profound introspection. Black Panther emerged as a hero reflective of his era, engaging in battles against the Klan amidst a period when black Americans were increasingly advocating for justice. His debut in American mainstream pop culture elicited considerable impact. During the 1960s and 1970s, the predominance of white liberal writers within the publishing industry often led to narratives characterized by caricature and stereotype, underscoring the need for nuanced representation (Sautman, 2021: 17). Don McGregor endeavors to redefine the main character, diverging from conventions associated with Blaxploitation films. However, questions may arise regarding his authority to depict the black experience, given his identity as a white male devoid of firsthand experience with the historical traumas endured by black communities. Significantly, Billy Graham, a Harlem native and the sole African-American employed at Marvel Comics during that period, contributed as a cartoonist to much of *"The Panther v. The Klan"* (Howe, 2018). The series contains some of the most shocking imagery in the comic book medium. The illustrations he crafted, albeit historically underappreciated, exuded a raw, emotionally resonant quality that complemented McGregor's poignant verbal discourse with precision. Their collaborative efforts yielded outcomes that catalyzed

robust dialogues surrounding the pervasive issues of racism, white supremacy, and the nuanced facets of black identity.

While the superhero genre has remained relatively static since its inception, creators exhibit a fervent dedication to reshaping established conventions to align their comics with contemporary socio-cultural currents. A defining characteristic of the genre lies in imbuing the central protagonist with extraordinary abilities; in the case of Black Panther, his strength derives from the affirmation of his black identity. Furthermore, superhero narratives have traditionally revolved around the archetype of a mythic struggle between the forces of heroism and villainy. Extensive discourse surrounds the delineation of moral absolutes, with the personification of these elements constituting a recurring motif within comic book literature. Central to this dynamic are contrasting moral paradigms, the interpretation of which remains inherently subjective, albeit susceptible to cultural influences. *"The Panther v. The Klan"* diverges from conventional treatments of these dichotomous concepts by introducing a nuanced 'gray area' wherein individuals who passively enable acts of malevolence bear a commensurate degree of responsibility alongside the primary perpetrator. This thematic principle resonates with contemporary social realities, reflecting parallels with narratives espoused by the Black Lives Matter movement. Implicit in this framework is the notion that individuals who fail to actively confront systemic racism are complicit in perpetuating discriminatory practices.

Despite being published in the 1970s, the series delves into the themes of racism and black identity with a depth that avoids superficial, color-blind narratives. Notwithstanding observable strides toward societal equity, African Americans in the 21st century continue to grapple with pervasive inequities and systemic racial discrimination across multiple spheres. This reality manifests in various forms, including restricted access to quality education and entrenched challenges in securing gainful employment. Within the pages of the comic, poignant depictions also underscore the enduring scourge of police brutality and governmental indifference. The visual motif of Black Panther defiantly rejecting a Molotov cocktail evokes vivid parallels with countless instances captured in photos and videos depicting young black individuals, their faces obscured, hurling flaming tear gas canisters at law enforcement officers. Such scenes unfolded amidst the backdrop of the United States in 2020, amid a series of ostensibly "peaceful" protests precipitated by the tragic murder of George Floyd.

Contemporary comics increasingly embrace diverse cultures and perspectives, reflecting a growing social consciousness within the medium. These narratives shape viewpoints, challenge ideologies, and foster introspection, offering communities unique ways to engage with reality. Given their extensive historical lineage, comics transcend generational divides, solidifying their role as a cornerstone of American mythology. Critical examination of the narrative evolution, representational dynamics, and inclusivity within the comics industry, particularly within contentious thematic domains, is imperative for comprehending the intricate mechanisms underpinning the formation of specific social attitudes. Notably, T'Challa, as a fictional construct, emerges as a potent symbol of empowerment, transcending the confines of his narrative context to inspire

self-actualization among the broader African American community, courtesy of the insightful storytelling prowess of screenwriters like Don McGregor.

The legacy of Black Panther has transcended the confines of comic book pages, finding profound resonance in the era of audiovisual media. The global successes of the *"Black Panther"* (2018) and *"Black Panther: Wakanda Forever"* (2022) movies, both directed by Ryan Coogler, solidified T'Challa's role as a cultural icon. The films showcased an unprecedented celebration of African culture, Afrofuturism, and black empowerment. Beyond cinema, his impact extends into the realm of video games (*"Marvel's Avengers", "Marvel Ultimate Alliance 3"*), where his presence highlights the importance of diverse representation in interactive media.

Black Panther has become emblematic within popular culture, symbolizing a proud assertion of black identity, Afrofuturism, and a steadfast commitment to combatting injustice. While Stan Lee and Jack Kirby initially eschewed imbuing his character with overt political undertones, it is largely owing to their creation that T'Challa has attained enduring popularity. As the pioneering black superhero, he catalyzed profound societal dialogues surrounding issues of racism, black identity, and the ongoing struggle for equality. Within the mainstream American pop cultural landscape, he continues to occupy a preeminent position as one of the most resonant representations of race. Although the agency of a fictional hero in effecting tangible change, in reality, is limited, the symbolic potency embodied by Black Panther holds the potential to galvanize comic book audiences toward meaningful action. It is plausible that individuals need only to invest belief in what he represents to them to inspire proactive engagement with pressing social issues. In McGregor's words, „it last for just a moment, perhaps it never really existed at all except in Kevin Trublood's mind. Perhaps that is the only place it need exist" (Jungle Action #19, 1976: 10).

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