PENGUIN CLASSICS
MARVEL COLLECTION

MARVEL

BLACK PANTHER

DON McGREGOR! RICH BUCKLER!
BILLY GRAHAM! STAN LEE! *and* JACK KIRBY!

SERIES EDITOR BEN SAUNDERS! INTRODUCTION BY QIANA J. WHITTED!
FOREWORD BY NNEDI OKORAFOR!

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PENGUIN BOOKS

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Foreword

My path to writing the big black cat started with a fat orange cat.

I've always been attracted to comics. Even before the word, it was the black line that drew me (pun intended). It began when I was about seven years old in the early '80s with . . . *Garfield*. My father was an avid *Chicago Sun-Times* newspaper reader, and every day he would sit at the dinner table and read it. It was while hanging around him that I noticed that there was a comics page every day. *The Family Circus*, *Hi and Lois*, *Bloomsbury*, *Calvin and Hobbes*, *Momma*, *Ziggy*—there were so many I enjoyed. And, oh man, on Sunday, there were pages of comics, and they were in *color*! I loved these little stories told in pictures. But I became most obsessed with *Garfield*.

It was more than the hijinks and jokes. There was something about those dark lines, how they looped and swirled to create images and how those images melded with the "drawings" of letters that were words, communicating thoughts and ideas with the pictures. Even before I was writing stories using prose I was marveling at the dance of symbolic representations of sound and images.

Nevertheless, I didn't arrive at comic books until much later in life. When I was a kid, I'd see the local comic book shops. I was interested and so, yes, I'd walk in there. I had seen boys at school with comic books and their colorful covers with titles in electrical-looking fonts. The excitement of those boys and their flimsy books intrigued me. And since I was very little, I'd always had dreams of flying. Heroes in capes with super powers were definitely in my realm of wonder.

However, when I'd push that comic book shop door open, the bell

on the top of the door would ring and then something problematic would happen. I'd like to compare it to that moment when Luke and Obi-Wan walk into the bar or that record-scratch moment in Westerns when the stranger walks into the saloon. The comic book shop was always full of white boys; the person behind the counter was always a white guy. None of this bothered me; I'd grown up in a white neighborhood. What bothered me was their reaction to me. The staring, and *staring*.

I'd slowly walk in, trying not to make eye contact with anyone. However, the silent scrutiny and feeling that I had invaded a place where I wasn't welcome would be so strong that I'd leave soon after. On top of this, I was unfamiliar with comic books, how they were shelved, so I didn't even know what I was seeking. Let alone the fact that when I glanced at all the covers, I didn't see anyone black or female or outside a male gaze.

It was the late '80s. I was between eight and twelve years old in those years, the child of Nigerian immigrants, an athlete playing and grandly excelling in the sport of tennis. I was navigating through a lot of blatant racism, prejudice, and xenophobia. I knew when to avoid a space, even if I didn't fully understand the depth of it. Comic book shops remained an unwelcoming place on several levels for many years. I can't state it enough: to be white and male was such a privilege if you loved or wanted to love comic books.

My discovery of super heroes didn't happen until I was nineteen years old and paralyzed from spinal surgery complications when doctors tried to straighten out my acute scoliosis. That's a lot crammed in one sentence, I know. I wrote a whole book about it called *Broken Places & Outer Spaces*. I was a semipro tennis player and a track star with severe scoliosis that was increasing in severity every year. I was eventually told that I could either have the spinal surgery to straighten it out or become crippled by twenty-five and have a much shorter life due to compressed organs. When I had the surgery, I was in the anomalous 1 percent of patients who mysteriously respond to the surgery with paralysis. So I went from super athlete to paralyzed from the waist down in a matter of nine hours. I'd lost my super powers.

It took me months to regain sensation in my legs (and the doctors didn't know whether I would until it gradually happened). After a month in the hospital, and then another several weeks of rigorous physical therapy, I got out of that wheelchair and began using a walker. Eventually I graduated to a half walker, then cane, then finally using only my own two legs. But that summer, while I was still using the walker, I spent a lot of time in front of the TV. And that's when I discovered the X-Men. I especially loved Storm, who could fly. But the one who intrigued me most was Wolverine because he was so angry and he had a skeleton that was unbreakable. As a twenty-year-old who'd just lost her super powers and was now trying to figure out who the heck she was, this discovery gave me strength. It was the first time I understood why so many loved super heroes. The first super hero comic I read was *Wolverine*.

I went on to consume comics through graphic novels, including *Persepolis*, *A Contract with God*, *Bone*, and two more iconic cat narratives in *The Rabbi's Cat* and *We3*. I read these while I earned my second MA and then PhD. I came to more super heroes through Grant Morrison's *Animal Man* and *Vixen* and Alan Moore's *Watchmen*. And then, years later, while I was a professor at the University at Buffalo, I learned about a country in Marvel's Africa called Wakanda and I said, "Hmmm, interesting." I thank Ta-Nehisi Coates for introducing me to King T'Challa. Yes, yes, I was late, but we can't always be on time.

Writing *Black Panther: Long Live the King* (2017–2018) was a marvelous experience. Initially, I came to it looking at King T'Challa and the country of Wakanda out of the side of my eye. I'm Igbo (a Nigerian ethnic group), and among the Igbo there's a common saying, "*Igbo enwe eze*," which means, "The Igbo have no king." Being a series of democratic societies consisting of small independent communities, historically, Igbos didn't have a centralized government or royalty.

I grew up hearing this phrase, and between this and also being an American, any type of monarchy gets my side-eye of disapproval . . . even a mythical one. Then I realized, in writing *Black Panther*, I could affect him and his country. I could enter into direct conversation and

be heard. It was like visiting a country for the first time, and not as a tourist, but as a diplomat. I couldn't be passive during my visit, and that made my visit even more interesting. I got to listen to, know, and speak to T'Challa and the people and land of Wakanda.

Black Panther and Wakanda hold a powerful place in the Marvel Universe. I've always viewed Wakanda as a proper return of African Americans (the direct descendants of enslaved Africans during the Transatlantic Slave Trade) to the continent of Africa. Because one can never go back in the past, the gaze is into the future, and that was where the reconciliation was made . . . at least the beginning of one. There's a sense of homecoming and belonging in *Black Panther* that is celebratory. One gets to claim Wakanda as a space and make an African connection.

One of the reasons I agreed to write T'Challa, Shuri, the Dora Milaje, and Wakanda was because I wanted to further develop that bridge. I focused on bringing T'Challa closer to the common people of Wakanda and later, when I wrote Shuri as the Black Panther, bringing her to the rest of Africa. Comics are powerful indeed. King T'Challa, the mantle of Black Panther, and the country of Wakanda have all evolved *so much* over the decades. I look forward to what comes next.

Nigerian writer Ben Okri once wrote in his book *Birds of Heaven*, "The happiness of Africa is in its nostalgia for the future, and its dreams of a golden age." I think this is true both on the continent and in the Black Diaspora beyond. Wakanda Forever.

NNEDI OKORAFOR

Volume Introduction

Long after night has fallen, the lone figure of the Black Panther staggers into the fog of a Georgia swamp and over gnarled tree roots before collapsing in the marsh. The smoldering cinder of a broken cross is strapped to his back, and his skin blisters beneath a midnight blue costume that he drags through the muck and slime. In this harrowing scene from the 1976 issue of *Jungle Action* featuring the Black Panther, King T'Challa has ventured far from his beloved home in the fictional African country of Wakanda. He can barely move or speak after having depleted his tremendous strength in single-handedly fighting back the hooded white supremacists who tried to burn him alive. The mental and physical devastation is so great that a flare of uncertainty breaches his thoughts: "Why survive? Why not succumb to the language of the pain?" Still he rises from the swamp, and what pushes his body forward is a deeper, more restorative jolt of defiance: "Come on, he speaks angrily, chiding himself . . . you have travelled this *identity labyrinth* before. Is it a *journey* you must return to endlessly . . . seeking resolutions to problems your past convinced you were resolved?" (JA 21.7).

T'Challa is a king, a warrior, a scientific genius, and under the mantle of Black Panther, he is the divinely sanctioned leader of an unconquered African people. Yet his continual return to the labyrinth of identity speaks to the fundamental predicament that has accompanied his character across the pages of Marvel Comics since 1966. No matter the threat to his sovereignty, no matter the villains to be overcome, doubt is the adversary that never tires; the inner journey of

discovery will always demand the mighty hunter's utmost attention. To know one's self and remain steadfast in the face of ignorance and resentment. To find an unconditional place of belonging and extend its welcome to others. To wield immense power with skill, conviction, and reverence. These are the death-defying feats that make the Black Panther not just a reigning monarch but a super hero.

The Black Panther, created by Stan Lee and Jack Kirby, is widely heralded as the first high-profile Black super hero in mainstream American comic books. The decades prior to his thrilling appearance in the two *Fantastic Four* issues that open this collection saw a number of notable precursors, including Prince Lothar from the *Mandrake the Magician* newspaper comic strip in the 1930s, Lion Man from *All-Negro Comics* #1 in 1947, and Waku, Prince of the Bantu in *Jungle Tales* from Marvel's predecessor, Atlas Comics. Lee and Kirby would also include African American soldier Gabe Jones as a series regular in *Sgt. Fury and His Howling Commandos* starting in 1963. Yet the Black Panther's status as a super hero distinguished his recurring character, along with his prominence as one of the Earth's Mightiest Heroes in Marvel's team, the Avengers, and his appearance in a successful solo series starting in the 1970s.

T'Challa joined the Marvel Comics Universe as the ruler of a hidden African kingdom where tribal traditions merge seamlessly with scientific and technological advancements. The character was developed as part of a larger effort to connect with Black readers and bring more diversity to Marvel's stories. His earliest images were based on Kirby's concept sketches of a Black hero that he and Lee called the Coal Tiger. Staring confidently with a smile, the Coal Tiger had the imposing physique of a boxing champ in a black-and-yellow-striped costume and red cape. By the time the character appeared on newsstands, he was clad in the all-black attire and enigmatic stealth of a panther.

Born and raised in Wakanda and educated abroad with a PhD in physics, T'Challa leads the inhabitants of his country in protecting the rare and powerful sound-absorbing metallic ore called Vibranium. The material is mined from the region's sacred mound, created

by a meteor that fell to Earth thousands of years ago. Holding everything together is the mythical Panther God and the sacred powers of the heart-shaped herb that heightens the senses and reflexes and endows the body with exceptional strength, stamina, speed, and healing abilities. The Black Panther is a powerful combination of an ancestral bloodline and a spiritual bounty, a super hero with a title that is marked by constant tests and trials of leadership, duty, and community obligation.

The origins of the Black Panther are also rooted in the social and political transformations that occurred in the United States and around the world in the mid-1960s. While the nonviolent protest campaigns of the civil rights movement resulted in meaningful legislative changes, including the landmark Civil Rights Act of 1964, the struggle for African Americans to freely exercise their rights as citizens remained urgent and necessary. A rising generation of activists were increasingly dissatisfied with the movement's methods given the persistence of racial terrorism, voter intimidation, and entrenched economic barriers, along with the prolonged impact of the Vietnam War. "Black Power" became a rallying cry that leaders such as Stokely Carmichael of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) used to galvanize a new sense of racial pride and self-reliance within Black communities. Even embracing the term *Black* (rather than *Negro* or *Colored*) signaled a more radical identity for the 1960s activists who consigned assimilationist aims to the past and linked people of African descent in America with the revolutionaries who had rejected colonial rule in Ghana, Kenya, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and other countries across the African continent.

Months prior to the Black Panther's first comic book appearance in July 1966, SNCC organizers worked with local Black residents in Lowndes County, Alabama, to form a political party called the Lowndes County Freedom Organization (LCFO). In defiance of the white rooster that the state's Democratic Party adopted as a badge of white supremacy, the LCFO used the black panther to identify their organization on the ballot. Although Lee and Kirby have stated that the political symbol was not the basis for their character, scholars Adilifu

Nama, Crystal Am Nelson, and Charles W. Henebry note that Marvel's creative team was undoubtedly aware of the conversations surrounding the social and political upheavals in the South, whether or not they had direct knowledge of the Lowndes County group or the Clark College mascot on which the LCFO panther emblem was based.[1] Other sources such as Dennis Culver point to earlier inspirations, including Harry Wills, the World Colored Heavyweight Championship boxer who was called the Black Panther during the 1910s and 1920s. A few decades later, the US Army's 761st Tank Battalion, the first predominately African American armored unit to engage in combat during World War II, would be dubbed the Black Panthers, too.[2]

Clearly, then, many people regarded the dark-colored large feline from Africa, Asia, and the Americas to be an inspiring and provocative symbol: from the armed forces to the world of politics and sport. What matters most is the cultural climate in which these ideas about racial justice and equality circulated, ultimately generating an affirming visual rhetoric of Black courage and self-determination that coalesce in the panther. The summer debut of Marvel's super hero is bookended between these earlier iterations and the founding of the Black Panther Party for Self Defense by Huey P. Newton and Bobby Seale in Oakland, California, in October 1966. While the organization's paramilitary style and views on armed self-defense often dominated media coverage, their extensive platform advocated for economic, social, and political power within Black communities; spoke out against police brutality; and instituted social programs for job training, medical access, and food assistance. In his speech at a conference called "Black Power and Its Challenges," Carmichael explained: "We chose for the emblem a black panther, a beautiful black animal which symbolizes the strength and dignity of Black people, an animal that never strikes back until he's back so far into the wall, he's got nothing to do but spring out. Yeah. And when he springs he does not stop."[3]

Such sentiments were echoed in the uprisings in Watts, New York, Chicago, and Cleveland, but also through unprecedented Black civic

engagement and in artistic movements that eschewed white Western ways of thinking to embrace aesthetic traditions grounded in the African diaspora. Several scholars see Lee and Kirby's decision to locate T'Challa's home across the Atlantic Ocean as an effort to distance the character from the more immediate tumult taking place in the United States.[4] Others such as Nama regard the Black Panther's African identity as central to his embrace among readers as a progressive symbol and "a triumphant vision of Afrofuturist blackness."[5] The fact remains that Marvel's Black Panther emerged at a pivotal moment during the 1960s, when America was confronting the deep historical consequences of race and racism in a well-trodden identity labyrinth of its own.

In turn, T'Challa's earliest appearances seem marked by a pronounced ambivalence: Is the Black Panther friend or foe? Just as *Fantastic Four* #52 was being stocked on newsstands, marketing teasers hinted at the debut of this "mystery villain," while the published cover heightens the suspense by depicting the Black Panther masked and menacing in mid-leap, grasping for Reed Richards (aka Mr. Fantastic) and his companions. His dark body looms larger on the opening page beneath a foreboding promise that the Fantastic Four will be "trapped" in his realm. Initially the unsuspecting team is awestruck by T'Challa's gift of an ultramodern jet and an invitation to travel to Africa. But instead of the safari vacation that the heroes expected, the Fantastic Four become unwitting prey in the "man-made jungle" of Wakanda, where the dense tropical vegetation shimmers and hums with dials, wires, and computer technology. As Ben Saunders notes, *Fantastic Four* served "as Kirby and Lee's primary laboratory, a space for fearless experimentation and invention."[6] Mysterious interactions with unknown people and species were a key part of the team's explorations, from the Mole Man and the shape-shifting Skrulls to Namor the Sub-Mariner from Atlantis. Readers eventually learn that the Fantastic Four were brought to Africa as part of an elaborate training exercise to test the Wakandan warrior's skill as he prepares to take revenge on the merciless villain named Klaw, the Master of Sound, who murdered T'Challa's father, King T'Chaka.

Questions about the Black Panther's allegiances would continue to surface, notably after he is offered a place among the Avengers. T'Challa is forced to use his stealth to sneak into their locked New York mansion in *Avengers* #52, only to be arrested after discovering the dead bodies of Hawkeye, Goliath, and the Wasp inside. The triple murder would turn out to be a hoax orchestrated by another villain known as the Grim Reaper. In every instance, the Black Panther proves himself to be honorable and trustworthy. T'Challa's debut even concludes with the king expressing a willingness to set aside the mantle of Black Panther and renounce his throne in order to pledge "my *fortune*, my *powers*—my very *life*—to the service of all mankind!" (FF 53.20). The shift from the so-called provincial interests of Wakanda to a global crusade affirmed that the Black Panther's commitments would ultimately align with the broader vision of Marvel's more established heroes. And given the fears of the Cold War era and incidents such as the Congo Crisis, scholar Martin Lund argues further that T'Challa's vows in these early appearances helped to tamp down Western anxieties over whether an independent African nation would resist communism and use its valuable resources to uphold democratic ideals. "Black Panther is an engineer-genius," notes Lund, "who represents Africa's potential postcolonial self-renewal."[7] To realize this potential, the comics often suggested that the implied threat of the "mighty, masked jungle mystery man" (FF 52.20) could be neutralized by enlisting his talents in a worldwide struggle against evil.

To fully appreciate the shape and substance of the world that Marvel imagined for the Black Panther also requires some understanding of how comic book genres were evolving in the period during the 1960s and 1970s known as the industry's Silver Age. Black Panther's creative team ironically reworked earlier tropes and character types from well-known "jungle" comics. Edgar Rice Burroughs's Tarzan adventures were among the most popular of this genre, and adaptations of the stories ran as a newspaper comic strip and various comic book serials for several decades starting in 1929. Historians Mike Benton and Bradford Wright note that this success prompted publishers such as Fiction House, Inc. and Fox Feature Syndicate to produce

their own titles that dramatized the exploits of white adventurers in remote lands facing off against angry natives, ferocious animals, and greedy hunters. As Wright explains, "Paternalistic, imperialistic, and racist, the jungle comics showed the reductionist comic book style at its ugliest."[8] The indigenous Black and brown people who populated these comics as secondary characters often remained fixed within the bounds of stoicism and savagery.

While many of these series were canceled by the mid-1960s, the familiar settings and caricatures of jungle comics would continue to shape readers' expectations for the Fantastic Four's mysterious trip to Africa. Lee and Kirby strategically use Ben Grimm (aka the Thing) to give voice to these assumptions through his surly misconceptions about the Black Panther and his home. Once Ben learns that the sleek new aircraft that Mr. Fantastic is piloting is from an African chieftain, his perplexed reply is revealing: "But how does some refugee from a *Tarzan* movie lay his hands on *this* kinda gizmo?" (FF 52.2). He goes on to boast of having seen "a million *jungle movies*" and claims to have little interest in hearing T'Challa's story, since after all, he can recite "half'a the *Bomba, the Jungle Boy* books by *heart*!" (FF 53.5–6). To reach Ben, and comic book readers like him, the story lingers on the astonishing convergences of the Black Panther's kingdom, reworking the cliché of the noble savage into "the collision of ancient civilizations and futuristic technologies" that would generate a more dynamic story-world.[9]

Indeed, what moves the Thing from skepticism to grudging respect is not only T'Challa's sense of honor but also the ingenuity of Wakandan engineering and science. Ramzi Fawaz makes the case that the plot is punctuated by ironic "moment[s] of misrecognition" and "visual reversals"[10] to prove that the people of Wakanda are "*not* the ordinary native tribe they *seem* to be!" (FF 53.1). For instance, Fawaz notes that during the hero's ceremony, Lee and Kirby disrupt the white colonizing gaze by positioning the Fantastic Four and their Native American friend, Wyatt Wingfoot, at the foot of T'Challa's throne as they marvel at a "socially and economically independent Africa." Likewise, the unmistakable evidence of Wakanda's technological

innovation and the Black Panther's exceptional abilities makes the "cross-cultural encounter" between him and the Fantastic Four mutually beneficial.[11]

Several years later, after traveling the globe alongside Captain America and the Avengers, the Black Panther returns to an icy welcome in Wakanda. First he defeats M'Baku, the Man-Ape in *Avengers* #62, only to face a daunting new rival. Erik Killmonger attempts to seize T'Challa's title and end his life with an ensemble of ruthless challengers who make the king a stranger in his own home. The story, called "Panther's Rage," extended for thirteen issues, from September 1973 to November 1975, in *Jungle Action*, resulting in one of the earliest examples of a self-contained narrative arc in mainstream American super hero comic books. Writer Don McGregor collaborated with a team of artists, including Rich Buckler, Billy Graham, and Gil Kane, on the critically acclaimed story, all of which is included in this collection.

As with the Black Panther's *Fantastic Four* appearance, Marvel's editors chose to build the foundation of the super hero's first solo adventures out of the remnants of an outdated genre. When *Jungle Action* was relaunched in 1972, it contained reprints of 1950s stories featuring white adventurers such as Lorna the Jungle Queen and Jann of the Jungle. Cheap to produce, the series was merely intended "to capture shelf space from the growing competition in the comics market."[12] By then other Black characters were making their way through the door that T'Challa had opened years earlier, including Captain America's companion the Falcon (1969), DC's John Stewart as Green Lantern (1971), and Luke Cage in his own series in 1972. Historian David Taft Terry notes that Marvel even began to incorporate Black supporting characters into their comics, including Dr. Bill Foster (later known as Black Goliath) and *Daily Bugle* city editor Joseph "Robbie" Robertson.[13] McGregor, a copy editor and staff writer at Marvel, was disturbed to see the stories in *Jungle Action* still in circulation. "I wasn't particularly thinking about the Black Panther," he admits. "I hadn't given it any thought more than that I hated them reprinting a lot of those terribly insulting, often racist stories."[14] When McGregor was assigned to write Black Panther stories for the title instead, he

saw an opportunity to build a richer, more complex narrative, one that explored King T'Challa's life and struggle from the inside out.

Revamping a minor title that generated little profit may not have seemed like a particularly controversial venture in 1973. Yet McGregor took creative risks that would build on the foundation that Lee and Kirby established in order to chart a new direction for Marvel's African Avenger, prompting scholar Rebecca Wanzo to cite "Panther's Rage" as "the major first step in decolonizing the character."[15] The story takes place entirely in Wakanda, starting with the sixth issue of *Jungle Action* featuring the Black Panther. And with no cameo appearances from the rest of the Avengers and only a single white supporting character, the series featured a virtually all-Black cast for its two-year run. In making this decision, McGregor offered sound logic ("This is a hidden, technologically advanced African nation. Where are the white people supposed to come from?!") while also insisting on the integrity and agency of the story's protagonist. As he writes in the essay that appears in this volume: "I did not want the black hero to have to rely on white heroes to save the day for him."[16]

Instead readers see T'Challa benefiting from his relationships with his trusted advisors W'Kabi, Taku, and Zatama. By his side is Monica Lynne, the soul songstress and social worker from America, who became his first romantic interest. Also appended to each installment were detailed maps, concept sketches, story recaps, and other back matter that were solicited to ensure that there would be no more room for 1950s jungle reprints. Taken together, as media studies scholar Todd Steven Burroughs notes, "McGregor expanded T'Challa's fictional universe greatly, giving Wakanda a distinct look and culture, a geography, religious rituals, tribal rivalries, and, perhaps most importantly, a royal court for King T'Challa. With McGregor's Panther, you could read a comic about a universe that, up until 1973, was unthought of: one starring an African king in an African land, separate from the Avengers."[17]

Artists Rich Buckler and Billy Graham joined McGregor in redefining the hero's presence on the page. In the second skin of his costume,

the Black Panther moves with the long agile strides and graceful leaps of a gymnast. The narrative drawings depict his stamina and stealth against a teeming landscape that includes humid jungle forests and swamps, deep caverns and snow-topped mountain ranges, modest villages and the opulent rooms of the royal palace. Graham, who would pencil most of the issues, was the first African American artist to work on a Black Panther title. He became a part of the creative team after spending the previous year on *Luke Cage, Hero for Hire* and prior to that working as art director at Warren Publishing, where he and McGregor first became friends. On "Panther's Rage," Graham became well-known for the comic's striking title pages and action sequences. Writer James Heath Lantz notes that "McGregor's storytelling style seemed to be in sync with Graham's larger-than-life images."[18] While the Vibranium-enriched technologies and scientific advancements of earlier Black Panther stories are less apparent in *Jungle Action*, the creators—including colorist Glynis Oliver—worked together to relay what McGregor has called the "distinct, magical reality" of Wakanda.[19]

This visual aesthetic further distinguished Black Panther from other 1970s Black comic book heroes, who tended to operate in urban spaces where reality was defined by the economic blight and racial disparities of the American ghetto. Luke Cage's series is often singled out for approximating the speech, fashion, and social awareness of popular Blaxploitation cinema in films such as *Shaft* (1971), *Blacula* (1972), and *Cleopatra Jones* (1973). Yet David Taft Terry points out that Marvel relied on "black militant" stock characters to integrate numerous titles, adapting the hypermasculine attitudes and oversimplified renderings of Black Power ideology that independent filmmakers helped to make so notorious during the early 1970s.[20] Buckler and Graham also found ways to incorporate aspects of modern African American popular culture into their renderings of the Panther. In his throne room, for example, King T'Challa is draped in a modified version of the gold-chain outfit worn by singer Isaac Hayes for the Watts, Los Angeles, community benefit concert that was released as the 1973 documentary film *Wattstax*. Such visual allusions allowed "Panther's

Rage" to indirectly reference the soundtrack of Black unity created by the Stax Records concert that, according to the promotional poster, drew "100,000 brothers and sisters turning on to being black . . . telling it like it is!"

This time, however, the Black Panther's loyalty is called into question by a fellow Wakandan. Killmonger was born N'Jadaka in a village near the mountains on the country's western border. Orphaned in his early years and enslaved by Klaw in the Vibranium mines, he was kidnapped and transported to the United States against his will. When Killmonger returns to Africa, he is determined to take control of the country's people and resources for vengeful ends. Readers see evidence of Killmonger's power in the fierce symmetry that finds the two opponents clashing high atop Warrior Falls both at the start and the finish of the story's main twelve chapters. Joining him in the battle to dethrone T'Challa in the intervening issues are American snake charmer Venomm and Wakandans Malice and Lord Karnaj. The henchmen duo Kazibe and Tayete provide a measure of comic relief through their run-ins with the "Panther Devil," while a supernatural world comes to life in Baron Macabre, Sombre, and King Cadaver. Just as striking are the beasts of nature that challenge the Black Panther: rhinos, alligators, gorillas, and even prehistoric dinosaurs.

While the Black Panther emerges victorious from each battle, the toll that these altercations take on his mind and body is a recurring theme throughout "Panther's Rage." McGregor, Buckler, and Graham extend the meticulous world-building of Wakanda to the architecture of T'Challa's interior life, and as a result, the impact of every accusation, every betrayal and disappointment, lands on his shoulders like a body blow. As the king's country splinters, his own advisory council begins to openly wonder about his allegiances, too. Compounding their suspicions about his time away in foreign lands is his devotion to Monica, an "out-worlder" who is unfamiliar with Wakandan traditions and rituals. Killmonger exploits these vulnerabilities in his quest for dominance, forcing T'Challa to defend his crown on multiple fronts and leading scholars like Julian C. Chambliss to conclude that "in McGregor's tale T'Challa is a king first and a hero

second."[21] Just as the heart-shaped herb that bestows the sacred Panther powers must be replenished, so T'Challa's lineage only enables access to the throne; the kingdom's trust must be earned by its leader, again and again.

Critics often comment on McGregor's generous use of the omniscient narrative voice to relay the Black Panther's thoughts and emotions during the *Jungle Action* run. His narration amplifies Buckler and Graham's dynamic page layouts with a contemplative writing style that can transform any encounter into a multivolume treatise on the responsibilities of power and the human costs of war. Ultimately McGregor's approach reveals what lies beneath the principled composure that is Black Panther's signature character trait. Readers are offered a glimpse of the hero's tactical deliberations as well as his rare moments of apprehension and righteous anger. The setting further reflects T'Challa's inner turmoil, and as scholar José Alaniz suggests, "During his grueling journey back to civilization, its changing landscapes mirror the protagonist's growing desperation and will to triumph. To a degree not seen before in superhero comics, the natural setting entails the character."[22]

One example comes at the start of issue #10, when a stretch of quiet finds the king on the banks of a Wakandan river. Even as the hostile world edges closer (in this case, the twenty-foot-long crocodile behind him), we are invited to observe T'Challa "staring into the waters at *his* reflection [. . .] as if he has forgotten who he once *was* or who he now *is*!" (JA 10.1). Soon the crocodile strikes and the panels on the next three pages depict the gaping jaws ripping through his flesh in a series of doubled images that show man and animal twisting in and out of the churning lake. The "fragmented vision" of the water becomes a revelation, one that we are told generates "a *stabbing clarity* the mirror-perfect figure *lacked*!" (JA 10.3). Is it only in the midst of such desperate fights for survival that the Black Panther can remember who he is?

The unrelenting physical trials that T'Challa faces are a crucial part of his story. In Graham's illustrations, the Black Panther can scarcely make it through a single issue without his costume being torn

to shreds by everything from wolves to cactus thorns to the armies of the undead. Scholars such as Rob Lendrum and Anna Peppard make the case that while most comic book super heroes draw meaning from the body in crisis, the Black Panther's race and gender invest the graphic depictions of his suffering with added significance. When he strikes back, as a Black male hero with animalistic panther-like qualities, he runs the risk of being narrowly defined as a "super-savage."[23] Readers must decide if spectacles like the crocodile attack double down on the stereotypes of hypermasculine Blackness or draw our attention instead to the humanity beneath the tattered remains of his clothing. The Wakandan king's own willfulness must also be taken into account, since as Peppard points out, "Black Panther is very rarely passive in his suffering; in the vast majority of his spectacles of bondage, the narration and the ways in which Graham's often intricate linework dramatically contorts, stretches, and enlarges the Panther's muscles emphasize[s] his active resistance."[24]

This kind of active resistance would carry over into McGregor and Graham's second *Jungle Action* arc, "The Panther vs. the Klan." (Three issues of the story are included here.) In the comic, T'Challa travels with Monica to Georgia to help investigate the murder of her sister. While this is not the Black Panther's first time in the United States or his first encounter with white supremacist violence, the story is a fascinating thought experiment that considers how a Black super hero with a royal African lineage might change the calculus of racial terrorism in the South. Would he be able to find the answers that have eluded Monica's family and white allies like *Georgia Sun* reporter Kevin Trueblood? Could he deliver justice against the bigots who treated Black American southerners as second-class citizens?

The Black Panther's intervention achieves unprecedented results, although the series was canceled mid-story with *Jungle Action* #24.[25] King T'Challa hurls the bodies of Ku Klux Klansmen through windows, uses their own weapons against them, and sends them retreating on their horses and motorcycles. At one point, Monica's mother tells the story of a cousin who was murdered after the Civil War by a group of former Confederate death riders. McGregor and Graham

stage a flashback that contrasts Mrs. Lynne's memory of her cousin Caleb, proud but defenseless, with a new ending that Monica supplies as she listens. In her vision, the Black Panther and Caleb take a stand together, defending his family from humiliation and fighting back bullets and the lynch rope. Monica's Reconstruction-era fantasy turns into a self-reflexive exercise that uses the super hero narrative to envision freedom for Black bodies and imaginations.

Significantly, "The Panther vs. the Klan" also makes a point to show how Monica and T'Challa's affection for each other grows. She acquires a richer personality and a more complex past as he learns about her family. While Monica was often treated as a liability in Wakanda, in Georgia she becomes his guide and cultural translator. It is the Black Panther who is the fish out of water, pushing a grocery cart down aisle three of a local supermarket (in full costume) or watching the Wakandan Sonar Glider land next to the Lynne family's front porch after dinner.

Still, some obstacles prove to be more difficult for T'Challa to overcome. In his attempt to protect Monica from an attack, local deputies assume the Black Panther is a criminal and join an angry mob in beating him until the sheriff intervenes. The police brutality that the Black Panther endures is an important indictment of the American justice system (and brings to mind his wrongful arrest at the Avengers mansion years before). This and other critical issues are invoked throughout the series with references to the writings of James Baldwin and Eldridge Cleaver. At the same time, the social realities of the comic are offset by the introduction of arcane occult figures. In addition to the KKK, T'Challa and the Lynne family are harassed by another "clan," a multiracial group of hooded vigilantes called the Dragon's Circle. The sometimes-confusing presence of both groups and the erratic pacing of the murder plot blemishes an unfinished story that is otherwise compellingly rendered.

One of the most remarkable scenes portrays the Black Panther interrupting a late-night Klan rally in the middle of the Devouring Swamp. A stunning full-page sequence shows his lithe dark blue form leaping among the tree branches high above, only to pause and spring

out fighting through the torches below. As the hooded figures swarm around him with shotguns and ropes, the comic makes clear that this is a battle that our hero could actually lose. He is strapped to a cross, and later, when his body is set ablaze, his inner voice resurfaces. Finding the courage to fight and to live in this moment means acknowledging that his flesh is not Christ-like nor invulnerable to hurt: "Don't you understand, a man can only take so much!" (JA 21.4). T'Challa allows himself to feel the grief, the tears, and the anger without succumbing to the "language of pain." His mind keeps fighting and his legs keep moving, swinging high enough to crack in half the wood that binds him.

Subsequent writers and artists in the decades to come would take the Black Panther through different variations of this identity labyrinth. Kirby returned to write and illustrate a solo *Black Panther* title during the late 1970s that revived the more science-fictional elements of the super hero in a cosmic, time-traveling adventure. A limited series during the 1980s by Peter B. Gillis and Denys Cowan forced T'Challa to fend for himself after being abandoned by the Panther Spirit. McGregor resumed the writing duties on *Marvel Comics Presents* and sent the Black Panther to confront apartheid in South Africa and reunite with his stepmother, Ramonda. In the character's longest run, from 1988 to 2003, writer Christopher Priest and artists such as Mark Texeira, Sal Velluto, and Bob Almond sharpened T'Challa's commanding presence as a monarch and wealthy philanthropist visiting New York City. This acclaimed series also introduces U.S. State Department staffer Everett K. Ross and the corps of Wakandan women selected from the country's eighteen tribes to protect the king, called the Dora Milaje. Starting in 2005, Reginald Hudlin and a host of artists including John Romita Jr., Scot Eaton, and Francis Portela expanded our understanding of Wakanda with a deeper accounting of the spiritual practices and political traditions that shape the country. In the process, Hudlin's run introduced T'Challa's younger sister, Shuri (who would take on the mantle of Black Panther at one point), and featured his brief marriage to Storm of the X-Men. King T'Challa would continue to face his nemeses Klaw and Killmonger during these

years, while the long-simmering tensions with the Avengers, and particularly King Namor of Atlantis, would erupt in various crossover events such as *Avengers vs. X-Men* in 2012.

When *Black Panther* relaunched in 2016 with writer Ta-Nehisi Coates and artist Brian Stelfreeze, T'Challa faces a civil war within Wakanda, one that forces him to reevaluate the monarchy in favor of a more democratic system. The series would be joined by a host of spin-offs such as *World of Wakanda*, *Black Panther & the Crew*, *Rise of the Black Panther*, and *Black Panther: Long Live the King*. And for the first time in the character's history, these titles featured an unprecedented number of Black women creators, including Roxane Gay, Yona Harvey, Nnedi Okorafor, Alitha Martinez, and Afua Richardson.

Each artist, writer, and editor, starting in 1966 with Lee and Kirby, has been instrumental in creating the Black Panther that we know today. Their contributions would come together in the award-winning 2018 motion picture, *Black Panther*, directed by Ryan Coogler and starring Chadwick Boseman in the title role. It would swiftly join the ranks of the top-grossing movies of all time, making more than $1.3 billion worldwide and becoming the first Marvel Comics Universe film to earn an Academy Award. The live-action production breathes new life and a rich cultural vitality into the Wakandan landscape that was unveiled so many years ago in the *Fantastic Four*, while the contours of T'Challa's personality and his righteous struggle in the face of Killmonger's resolve are indebted to the narrative constructed by McGregor, Buckler, and Graham. The film flawlessly dramatizes the enduring elements of the Black Panther's story that make this collection of comic books a Marvel classic. Across shifting political grounds and thorny paths of duty and conscience, T'Challa's journey bears witness to the capacity of established super heroes to develop both the vast and intricate dimensions of character over time. On these pages, the journey of the Black Panther begins.

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