RESEARCH

'Introducing the Sensational Black Panther!' *Fantastic Four* #52–53, the Cold War, and Marvel's Imagined Africa

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This article discusses *Fantastic Four* #52–53 (July–August 1966), in which Black Panther, Marvel's first black superhero, premiered. It argues that the character as he appeared in these issues is best read as an example of 'white on black' representation, or white images of blacks centered on white interests, filtered through Marvel's then-prevalent Cold War focus. The article first looks at the Fantastic Four as Cold Warriors to contextualize Black Panther. It then goes on to look at how Wakanda, Black Panther's tribe, and Klaw, the storyline's villain, are configured in relation to this context, in order to highlight the importance in the story of Cold War conceptions of and fears about the process of decolonization that was taking place on the African continent. Finally, it argues that Black Panther is rhetorically 'Americanized,' to better fit with US self-conceptions and to alleviate worries about what Africa's then-recent decolonization might mean for United States of America.

The Marvel Universe was born out of the Cold War. Most of its initial characters were children of nuclear anxieties, often partnered with other sociocultural concerns. The influence of the Cold War has been ably traced in individual case studies (Capitanio 2010; Genter 2007; Lund 2015: paras. 6–10) and in the *longue durée*, from the beginning of the 'Marvel Age' until the death of Captain America after 2006–2007's 'Civil War' (Costello 2009). Further, US comics and the Cold War have been studied from broader perspectives (York & York 2012). But as yet, little attention has been paid to the often simplistic treatment of the so-called 'Third World' in US comicdom generally, or in Marvel Comics specifically.[1] This article provides a modest corrective to this lacuna.

In placing the Fantastic Four into a larger Cold War context and reading Black Panther through this lens, it shows how the latter character was born out of fears about what the then-recent decolonization of several African nations could mean for the United States and the Cold War. It also shows how Black Panther is used to rhetorically alleviate those fears by 'proving' that the new African nation-states would align themselves with the West.

Setting the Stage

In writer Stan Lee and artist/co-plotter Jack Kirby's *Fantastic Four* (hereafter *FF*) #52–53 (July–August 1966), the eponymous superhero team is invited to the mysterious African tribal kingdom of Wakanda by its leader, a 'mighty, masked jungle mystery man' (1966a: 20) known to the US superheroes only as Black Panther. Building suspense, the first issue reveals that the FF were invited only to be hunted by Black Panther, who wants to measure his strength against theirs, to see if he is ready to face his father's murderer, Klaw (1966a; 1966b: 10). Just as Black Panther finishes explaining his motives in the second issue, Klaw returns to invade Wakanda with weapons made of solid, living sound, which the FF battle while Black Panther finds and defeats his nemesis (1966b). Once the threat has passed, Black Panther vows to use his wealth and power for good as a superhero.

Black Panther has received little academic attention to date. Previous writing has only glossed his introduction, focusing instead on later character developments that embraced postcolonial, anti-Apartheid, and anti-racist discourses (Burroughs 2014; Chambliss 2016). American studies scholar Matthew Yockey (2005: 76) mentions Black Panther in passing when writing about Lee and Kirby's tendency to ignore racial tensions in the United States. Noting that Black Panther is African and that the story takes place almost entirely on the African continent, Yockey also observes – accurately but problematically – that '[t]here are no African Americans in this [the FF's] world, only Africans, and they are benign people eager to assist the FF in their rhetorical battle for a democracy that only exists in [. . .] their Manhattan.' Although Yockey's interpretation is important to the present argument, his New York-centrism disregards a central facet of Black Panther's meaning; the character cannot be properly understood outside the comics' reference to Africa.

Conversely, the most sustained and important look at Black Panther's first appearance from a black studies perspective is American studies scholar Adilifu Nama's interpretation. Nama describes Black Panther as an 'idealized composite of third-world black revolutionaries and the anticolonialist movement of the 1950s that they represented':

> Against this tattered backdrop [of the failure of African anti-colonialism to live up to its promise], T'Challa [Black Panther] performs exemplary symbolic work as a recuperative figure and majestic signifier of the best of the black anticolonialist movement. [. . .] [Black Panther] succeeded in achieving economic and political independence for his people where many African nation-states have failed [. . .] [T]he Black Panther and his African homeland reimagined third-world political independence with science fiction flare [sic] and depicted black folk free from the detrimental impact of racism and colonialism (2011: 43–44).

This argument links Black Panther to colonialism and the 'Third World,' both of which were important in the character's creation, but in a way that reads the source material selectively and evinces a confirmation bias common in scholarship on comics and identity (cf. Lund 2015); the positive reading ultimately rests on being decontextualized and dehistoricized through the absence of the FF and Lee and Kirby.

It is important to acknowledge the debts Black Panther owes to the FF's long-established 'struggle for democracy' and to conceptions of the 'Third World' in the Cold War United States that these studies mention. This acknowledgement, however, must also include a recognition of the ideological baggage these concepts are loaded with. Most important to consider is how the 'Third World' is framed in these comics. It is not possible to here capture all the complexity associated with the term in the mid-1960s, or to even sketch the important developments that have taken place in its definition and reception since.[2] But a brief commentary on the term's construction and uses needs to be made.

'Third World' is a fluid term with a complex and controversial history. In one common Cold War understanding, which defined the 'Third World' negatively

through what it was not, the term gained traction as a catch-all for nations that remained un-aligned with either NATO (the 'first' world) or the communist bloc (the 'second' world). While technically inclusive of nations in the 'global north,' such as Sweden and Austria, more commonly 'Third World' was, and still is, used mainly to refer to nations in the 'global south,' many of them former colonies and 'developing' or overly exploited nations in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. The political struggles or goals of the peoples and leaderships in the 'Third World' thus conceived, which varied significantly among a highly diverse set of nations, went largely unconsidered in the West in the period discussed in this article. Rather, in this conception, the Third World was mainly regarded in the United States as territory to be won over to the NATO bloc. A second, positive sense, was captured in the notion of 'Third Worldism,' which is closer to what Nama envisions when he writes about 'third-world black revolutionaries and the anticolonialist movement.' 'Third Worldism' was also gaining traction in the years discussed. In this sense, the self-identifying 'Third World' sought unity in non-alignment and resistance to the major Cold War powers, and sought to displace the 'East-West' ideological division with a 'North-South' one, centered largely on economic and anti-colonial issues. The simplistic Cold War conception of the 'Third World' as non-aligned, potentially revolutionary, and therefore possibly dangerous is dominant in *FF*#52–53; the second conception is notable primarily in its absence from the comics pages.

Central to this article's analysis of *FF*#52–53's framing of the Black Panther and the Cold War 'Third World' is sociologist Jan Nederveen Pieterse's conception that 'white on black' representation – a phrase that refers to 'the whole spectrum of relations in which Western interests were dominant' – is not 'simply about images of blacks, but about white images of blacks.' As Pieterse notes, '[t]he question that keeps arising is, what interests of whites are being served by these representations? [. . .] Generally, in examining images of "others", one has first to ask, who are the producers and consumers of these images, and only then to question who are the objects of representations. The key that unlocks these images is what whites have made of blacks and why' (1992: 10). A first step in this process is to discuss the FF before Black Panther's introduction.

Fantastic Four, Cold War Marvel, and Superhero Identity

Black Panther first appeared in *FF*#52, a comic book dedicated to a quartet of superheroes: Mr. Fantastic, with the power to stretch his body to amazing degrees; Invisible Girl, who can turn invisible and project invisible force fields; the super-strong Thing, whose body had been turned into super-resilient orange rock; and the Human Torch, who can envelop his body in flames. The FF gained their powers from 'cosmic rays' in their first adventure, as they rushed into space to beat the 'Commies.' They immediately vowed to use their powers 'to help mankind' (Lee & Kirby 1962), and this vow was soon expanded to include 'fighting evil and injustice' (#3, quoted in Genter, 2007: 961).

The FF's pledge, which is redolent with exceptionalist Cold War self-conceptions in the US and of the supposed universality of the US system (cf. Jervis 2010: 23–25), is a commonplace in Marvel's Cold War-era comics; almost all their heroes treated the 'subject of the "right action" (or, as defined by Stan Lee, "with great power must come. . . great responsibility")' (Costello 2009: 16), albeit with different cultural-ideological foci. The FF are often described as having been created with a concern about the meaning and values of family (Costello 2009: 16; Genter, 2007: 956–959), but Yockey has convincingly argued for a different reading (2005), which puts the series' power-and-responsibility focus elsewhere: Mr. Fantastic, an engineer and an astronaut, was a sort of new frontiersman (cf. Costello 2009: 65–66), braving the new frontier of space and turning the space race into a story of heroism, alleviating anxieties that came from knowing that there was, again, an open frontier waiting. Throughout Lee and Kirby's initial 101-issue run, the neo-frontiersmen of the FF remained emblems of the United States' power and corporate-capitalistic hegemony. Their goal and purpose was 'the defense of the free world' (Yockey 2005: 67) and to use 'scientific knowledge to help the United States defeat the Soviet Union' (Genter 2007: 961).

When the FF speaks of 'aiding mankind,' they speak in a coded language that Lee and Kirby used repeatedly over their years of collaboration.[3] Like Marvel's other characters, they are engaged in the United States' 'providential' mission to lead the world in what is presented as a Manichaean conflict of good versus evil, based on the

notion that '[t]he economic and military power of the United States was not solely for national defense, but "a trust upon which rests the hope of free men everywhere"' (Costello 2009: 48). This ideological foundation echoes then-common conceptions in the United States about the USA's role on the international arena, as had been repeatedly articulated, from media mogul Henry Luce's influential 1941 idea of the 'American Century' (1999), through the financial aid extended to war-torn European nations in 1948–1952's Marshall Plan, on to the near-blustering universalism in several of President Kennedy's speeches (Gaddis 2005: 27–40, 101–104; Kennedy 1960a; Patterson 1997: 88, 104, 281, 330). Indeed, as Yockey (2005: 72) notes: 'If Kennedy is not always an actual presence in the comic, he is usually a rhetorical one.'

As numerous superhero studies note, superheroes are essentially conservative characters, resistant to social change, who time and again offer redundant messages that reproduce late capitalism (Capitanio 2010: 262–263; Costello 2009: 17–18; Eco 1979: 107–124; cf. Genter 2007). Pop culture scholar Jeffrey Brown (2011: 78) similarly notes that '[a]t its core, the superhero genre is about boundaries. [. . .] Specific plots are almost irrelevant, what the superheroes repeatedly enact for readers is a symbolic policing of the borders between key cultural concepts: good and evil, right and wrong, us and them.' Between 1961 and 1968, Marvel comics tended to reflect the Cold War consensus in the United States, marked by ideas that the USA represented freedom, progress, and providence, figuring major threats to the heroes and the nation as coming from outside, often in the form of communist plots for world domination (Costello 2009: 31–84). Black Panther emerged from this framework.

Wakanda, Imagined Africa, and Marvel's Whiteness

Today an optimism surrounds Black Panther, often linked to his name, which he shares with the Black Power organization, as if this connection were a given (cf. Brown, 2001: 19–20; Nama, 2011: 39–42). Moreover, journalist Sean Howe (2012: 85) asserts that Lee and Kirby thought up the name after reading in the *New York Times* about Alabama's Lowndes County Freedom Organization (LCFO), which used a black panther as a symbol of its political struggle. However, it is unlikely that

Lee and Kirby made a connection to either group, since they probably knew little to nothing about one and could not have known about the other when they created their Black Panther: LCFO had been mentioned in the *Times* – on January 6, January 10, and April 17, 1966 – but always in passing and in relation to southern Civil Rights issues (Roberts 1966a, 1966b, 1966c); the Black Panther Party was not founded until October 1966, months after Lee and Kirby's creation appeared. Further, even if the duo knew about the domestic Black Panther groups, their own creation was, as Yockey points out above, an African character, divorced from a United States context and, in part, disarming African American radicalism.

Lee and Kirby's history of black representation is important. A central aspect of early *FF* is its 're-inscription of American citizenship by way of New York City. The city becomes the metonym for the nation, so that the latter's concerns are condensed within the space of the city' (Yockey 2005: 63). Kirby rendered New York as purely white and middle class, in contradiction of the city's changing demographics (66). This normative whiteness extended throughout the Marvel Universe. Only in 1965 were 'incidental' black characters seen (Wright 2003: 219, 320n.76). Robbie Robertson, a minor recurring black character, entered *Amazing Spider-Man* cast in September 1967. Some comics took even longer: although *X-Men* is often hailed as an allegory of racial tolerance and Civil Rights struggles, the first black New Yorker in it appeared only five years in (#57, June 1969), while the series itself was still policing difference and advocating minority compromise with majority society; as Black Power grew stronger, so did *X-Men*'s backlash (Darius 2002; Lund 2015: paras. 11–18). Black Panther was cast into this white universe as Marvel's first black superhero (Wright 2003: 219).

Through a long tradition of literary and cinematic representation, a discursively created Imagined Africa has come into being, a place for white people to act in, change, and dominate, which has little to do with the actual continent (cf. Steinbock-Pratt 2009: 214); this Africa is 'essentially a blank page, onto which could be written multiple stories of white adventure' (217). This ideological nowhere land is where Black Panther first appeared. The policy of the United States had since the beginning of the Cold War 'favored anti-colonialism of a kind, but one in which racialized perceptions of backward non-Western peoples undercut support for immediate

independence' (Bradley 2010: 473). These conceptions had popular echoes, exemplified in a 1960 *New York Times* piece on the emerging Congo Crisis: 'The headlong rush of the Africans into independence has been enormously complicated by their backwardness. The majority of them–illiterate, living for the most part in primitive tribal societies in the bush–have no conception of what independence means' (Anonymous, 1960).

Lee and Kirby's Wakanda is a composite of colonial imagery that, in part, affirms this rhetoric. It is a tribal kingdom with highly desirable natural resources, in the form of the fictional mineral 'vibranium' (Lee et al. 1966b: 5–6), hidden within a '*primitive* [. . .] undeveloped' jungle that recalls notions about the African continent as a nature-rich but underdeveloped '*terra nullius*, that is, vacant land,' ripe for white interference (Pieterse, 1992: 35). Further, explicitly and with an air of sarcastic condescension, the Thing notes how the tribe and its formulaic predicament are transposed from Hollywood imagery, notably referencing Tarzan (literally: 'white skin'), which was originally deeply rooted in white supremacist ideals (Lee et al. 1966b: 5–6; Kasson, 2002: 157–218; Steinbock-Pratt 2009: 217–218). Rather than recycling plots about 'greedy *ivory hunters*' (Lee et al. 1966b: 7), however, as Black Panther reveals on the next page, the conflict is made relevant to the Cold War United States by centering on resources that are useful in the global conflict.

It is thus unsurprising that the comics' 'Africans' are consistently Othered. Black Panther is discussed in pejorative terms already on the story's first page, where the Thing paradoxically both asserts that he has '[n]ever *heard* of 'im' and wonders how 'some refugee from a *Tarzan* movie [could] lay his hands on *this* kinda gizmo [a flying car]?" (Lee et al. 1966a: 2). Other members of the FF are similarly stunned that Africans could have access to technology (1966a: 6, 8, 1966b: 10). (As Chambliss 2016 points out, this type of thinking would hold well into the 21st century.) The Wakandas confirm the stereotype: Black Panther's envoy is dressed in simple, toga-like robes (Lee et al. 1966a: 3); the tribe itself is populated by people wearing loincloths and animal headdresses (4); despite having demonstrably superior communication technology, they communicate through drums (13), which

helps establish an atmosphere of danger in the first issue, when the Wakandas' loyalties are still unknown (cf. Steinbock-Pratt 2009: 223); and they celebrate with traditional dances (Lee et al. 1966b: 1). Because Wakanda has shown technological progress, they are explicitly singled out as being '*not* the ordinary native tribe they *seem* to be' (1966b: 1), thus affirming their (limited) uniqueness and further marking Africa as Other. Although tribal life is still part of African life, this exotic imagery, in claiming through its dominance to be representative of African life as a whole, bears the hallmark of 'imperial psychology' and a colonial 'superiority complex,' and draws heavily on clichés from colonial ethnography and long-held stereotypes of the African continent that turn its peoples into spectacle (cf. Pieterse 1992: 88–94; Steinbock-Pratt 2009: 221–222).

However, Wakanda's progress is limited to a hi-tech '*man-made* jungle' (Lee et al. 1966a: 9), created by Black Panther 'just for a *lark*' (1966b: 10), and to a partial modernization of the tribal warriors' arsenal. Moreover, as the site where Black Panther chooses to attack the FF, the techno-jungle is not only an irresponsible use of technology, but one that signifies African development as a potential threat to the West (cf. Pieterse 1992: 122). The limited spread of progress in the Wakandas' jungle land, as well as the implicit disregard of African nation-states' existence and the near-complete absence of urbanity, also serve as a reaffirmation of Africa's supposed primitivism; as Pieterse wrote in the early 1990s (1992: 36), '[e]ven today Africa's cities and city-dwellers tend to remain invisible in the mainstream Western imagery of Africa, which prefers scenes in the bush,' despite continental Africa's urban history being older than Europe's.

Thus, Lee and Kirby's Wakanda reproduces notions about Africans as peoples without history, whose opportunity for progress and a future – their way out of their 'savage' past – comes from engaging in international trade, ignoring the fact of centuries of intra-continental trade and of European complicity in keeping Africa underdeveloped (Pieterse 1992: 64–65; Rodney 1981; Steinbock-Pratt 2009: 215). Here, as elsewhere in the history of 'white on black' representation, Africans can begin making history only after whites arrive (cf. Pieterse 1992: 64–65).

Klaw, Decolonization, and the Cold War

As Matthew Costello (2009: 21) notes, one vital component of a comics series' cultural meaning is the villains that populate it and how they are portrayed. The Cold War context and Marvel's origins within it are important to keep in mind here; the FF's agenda, after all, was to defend democracy and to fight the 'evil' Soviets, just as the majority of Marvel stories of the period 'represented the moral certainties of the Cold War, with plotlines that defined the conflict in stark contrasts between good and evil [rhetorically defined as hope vs. fear, freedom vs. tyranny, capitalism vs. communism]' (63).

The Wakandan drama's villain is Klaw, an arguably colonial-looking foe whose outside appearance, when compared to the square-jawed handsomeness of his opponents (**Figure 1**), aligns him with a long line of ugly, communist and *ersatz* communist Marvel villains whose outsides reflect the 'repulsive' system they represent (Costello 2009: 63–65). Further suggesting a communist coding, rather than being a 'greedy ivory hunter' drawn from stock 'jungle adventures' (Lee et al. 1966b: 6–7), Klaw murdered Black Panther's father to gain access to Wakanda's vibranium, in order to weaponize it and dominate the world (7–8); this event resembles official concerns in the Cold War United States about African uranium, which of course had its own weaponization uses tied closely to the contemporary world order (cf. Steinbock-Pratt 2009: 229–230). This pattern of villains developing ever-more powerful weapons in the pursuit of world domination was a recurring trope in Marvel Age comics,

Figure 1: Lee, S. [w], Kirby, J. [a], & Sinnott, J. [i]. The Way it Began..!, *Fantastic Four* #53, August 1966. New York: Canam Publishers Sales Corp. © Marvel Comics.

connected to the Cold War arms race in both implicit and explicit ways (cf. Capitanio 2010; Genter 2007). Moreover, when Klaw returns to steal Wakanda's vibranium, he is prepared to kill Black Panther and his whole tribe (Lee et al. 1966b: 18). As such, Klaw fits into the mold of arrogant, selfish, tyrannical, and murderously ruthless evil villains who thrive on fear that permeated conceptions in the United States of the USSR and Marvel's 1960s comics, and marked them as the antithesis of the superheroes and the US consensus identity they represented (Costello 2009: 47–48; cf. Gaddis 2005: 83–118; Kennedy 1960b; Lund 2015: para. 7).

It is also worth noting that Klaw's first coming, which according to Black Panther's timeline – '*ten years ago*–to the day (Lee et al. 1966b: 10) – would have been in the 1950s, when the 'Third World' and the African continent had first become a Cold War concern (Bradley 2010: 456). Wakanda seems to then have been in something akin to a prelapsarian state of tribal bliss. In addition to eliding Europe's colonial sins, this framing figures the threat as a 20th century neo-colonial and -imperial force, similar to how, in critiques from the United States, the USSR was often styled as engaging in Eastern or Soviet 'imperialism' and 'neocolonialism' (Fedorenko 1964: 7; Natufe 1984: 354).

Yockey notes that the space race did not truly capture the public interest in the United States until it was framed in Cold War terms: 'The rhetoric of space travel quickly took on dire tones and the possibility of Soviet control of space inspired [. . .] the space race of the 1960s' (2005: 62). Only then did superheroes come to champion it. Similarly, what was at stake in the non-aligned and decolonized world, according to the Cold War powers, 'was nothing less than each side's view of the rightness of its cause, the universalism of its values, and the answer to the question whose side history was on' (Jervis 2010: 33). In the superpowers' myopic view, the process of decolonization taking place on the African continent expanded the Cold War and created a new battlefield on which to struggle over the direction and destination of global change (Latham 2010: 259).

Read within this context, it seems not that the 1950s anti-colonial movement is interesting for Lee and Kirby in their figuration of Wakanda, but the 1960s fact of decolonization – seventeen independent states were founded on the continent

in 1960 alone (Bradley 2010: 464; Natufe 1984: 357) – and the threat of the new African nations choosing to align with the USSR (Bradley 2010: 475; cf. Cooper 2010: 60) or to remain non-aligned. By the mid-1960s, when *FF* #52–53 were produced, many non-aligned nations had proven resistant to superpower manipulation, and the East-West conflict hardened into more forceful and rigid superpower interventions and designs (Gaddis 2005: 119; Latham 2010: 269–272). More fuel was added to the Cold War fire by Soviet anti-colonialist rhetoric that seemed popular in some nations, Soviet moves to develop ties with postcolonial states, and US fears that anti-colonialism was inspired by communists (Cooper 2010: 60; Latham 2010: 264–265; Natufe 1984: 356–357).

The FF's travel to the new frontier of the decolonizing African continent, then, takes on political dimensions, in articulating and disarming threats of what could take colonialism's place. As was the case during the height of colonialism, the story's emphasis is on rivalry between imperial states, rather than on expansion or the process of decolonization itself (cf. Pieterse 1992: 86). Indeed, *FF* #52-53 follow a Cold War-era logic highlighted by Costello (2009: 34): 'Since a bipolar conflict necessarily becomes a zero-sum game–where a gain for one is a loss for the other–security became defined as keeping the USSR and its allies from expanding their sphere of influence, of containing communism.' Although somewhat myopic and Eurocentric (as Gaddis 2005: 119–143 notes, bipolarity was never an accomplished fact and non-aligned states were often able to exert considerable influence over the superpowers), this point applies to the 'Third World' as conceived of in Cold War and Marvel rhetoric. Within a Cold War framework, Lee and Kirby's Wakanda emerges as a simplistically allegorized decolonized nation *in absentia* that, according to the superpower logic of the day, ostensibly has to choose between the supposedly progressive system of the West, as exemplified by the FF, and the fearful iron fist of the East, as embodied in Klaw.

Black Panther, the Decolonized New Frontier, and 'Americanization'

As an 'African' character, Black Panther has a duality that is captured at the end of the *FF* #52: he is both 'hereditary *chieftain* of the Wakandas... and perhaps the *richest* man in all the world!' (Lee et al. 1966a: 20). His genealogy refers to colonial tropes,

framing him as the 'son of the greatest, wisest chieftain in all of Africa,' who was also a skilled hunter (1966b: 5). He gained his powers through traditional means, by 'eat[ing] certain *herbs*—and undergo[ing] rigorous *rituals*' (1966b: 10). Nama writes that this 'affirms the mysterious and metaphysical' (2011: 43), but the exact opposite can also be argued; the FF, like most Marvel Age superheroes, are products of technology – the US ingenuity that many then thought could accomplish anything (Patterson 1997: 317) – whereas Black Panther, the hero from outside the United States, is born out of atavistic practices.

At the same time, perhaps as an 'alibi' for his competence, Black Panther is 'Americanized.' Following conventions common in the superhero genre since its inception (cf. Smith 2001; Lund 2012) and to *FF* since its beginning, Black Panther is made to embrace and express values and tastes thought to be central to the culture and society of the United States and thus become 'American.' (This conception, of course, is exceptionalist; it gives the US primacy as *the* America, as opposed to the other nations on the American continents.) Like Mr. Fantastic, Black Panther is an engineer-genius who represents Africa's potential postcolonial self-renewal. Just as Mr. Fantastic put a personal face on the United States' space program in the 1960s (Yockey 2005), Black Panther puts a personal, ideologically informed face on postcolonial Africa: as Yockey notes, 'the engineer and the structures he produces represent a stabilizing force in a world perceived as increasingly unstable' (60), as Africa was in 1960s Cold War politics.

As is common among superheroes, Black Panther and the FF first meet in conflict. Their fight reveals Black Panther as strong, agile, and an able tactician, albeit ultimately not enough of either to win (Lee et al. 1966a: 10–19). Thus, his characterization does not reduce him to a 'Third World "third wheel,"' in the mold of so many 'dumbfounded and servile Africans [that] have populated western fiction' (Pieterse 1992: 111). Black Panther's decision to test his strength against the FF serves a dual purpose. First, the team's inclusion motivates telling a story set in Africa at all, since traditionally the continent has been used in pop culture as a place for white people to act (cf. Steinbock-Pratt 2009). Second, through the FF's victory, the story allows for an expression of Cold War US exceptionalism.

Furthermore, according to the Marvel Universe at the time, the superhero brawl implicitly asks the question of where Black Panther leans in the Cold War, and the comics then keep affirming that he is more capitalist than communist. The post-WWII period (up until around 1970) has been labeled the Golden Age of Capitalism, a period of rapid economic growth in the USA (Gaddis 2005: 115–118; Patterson 1997: 311–342, 450–452). Throughout the Cold War, the free market was both a weapon and a rhetorical tool against the USSR; according to this propaganda, consumption and the availability of consumer goods in the West signified capitalism's superiority (Patterson 1997: 317; Rosenberg 2010: 493–502). By living in ostentatious quarters that have little in common with the Wakandas' tribal milieu, Black Panther embodies both these aspects of the Western Cold War arsenal. The FF measure and approve of these quarters in terms of their adherence to consumer ideals promoted by the United States (**Figure 2**). 'You seem *puzzled* by what you have seen,' responds Black Panther, before affirming his consumer-capitalist credentials: 'You shouldn't be! After all, I can *afford* to pamper myself– to indulge my every whim–enjoy every luxury! I'm one of the *richest men* in the world!' (Lee et al. 1966b: 2). He has acquired this wealth, he later tells the FF, through international trade and education at the 'fine *universities* of both hemispheres' (10).

Black Panther, then, is prototypical of US conceptions of modernization, a person who marks a transition from a 'traditional' world of family, ascribed status, and

Figure 2: Lee, S. [w], Kirby, J. [a], & Sinnott, J. [i]. The Way it Began..!, *Fantastic Four* #53, August 1966. New York: Canam Publishers Sales Corp. © Marvel Comics.

religion, to a 'modern' order, 'characterized by individualism, achieved status, rationalism, and scientific confidence in the promise of progress,' of which the USA supposedly was the prime exemplar (Latham, 2010, p. 262). He is presented in common pop cultural terms as a "Good African": while he is leader of his own people, there is no question at the story's end that he puts himself in the service of the capitalist US heroes, rather than the other way around. Black Panther's goodness emerges through the revelation that he wants to work towards the same goals as the superheroes from the United States; it is entirely dependent on his actions toward the FF (cf. Steinbock-Pratt 2009: 222–223).

These rhetorical moves have several 'positive' (within Cold War discourse) effects for readers. First, Black Panther assuages fears about emerging African leaders and nations' Otherness in general, and their tending toward communism in particular (Cooper 2010: 57; Gaddis 2005: 122–124; Latham 2010: 259). Second, they assuage even deeper fears that newly independent African nations would openly ask for Soviet aid, as had happened before; perhaps most remarkable was the 1960 Congo Crisis, in which independent Congo's first Prime Minister, Patrice Lumumba, turned to the USSR in rebuffing a mutiny (which the US supported) that ended in Lumumba's murder (with US complicity), resulting in the African continent's becoming a Cold War battlefield and strengthening many African leaders' resolve for continental unity (Bradley 2010: 483; Latham 2010: 265–266; Natufe 1984).

Returning to Pieterse's question about what interests white representations of Africans and Africa serve, it is now possible to offer an answer in relation to Lee and Kirby's original Black Panther and Wakanda. Wakanda's initial representation is not about the postcolonial African continent, but about two white citizens of the United States' one-sided, distorted image of 'Africa' (cf. Pieterse 1992: 9–10). The 1960s was a decade when many emerging postcolonial nations wanted to pursue a policy of nonalignment and to shatter the bipolarity of the worldwide political atmosphere, but were frustrated at every turn by superpower interventions (Bradley 2010: 479–481; Latham 2010: 258–260). Such interests are nowhere to be found in Wakanda. Indeed, Lee and Kirby seem rhetorically to undermine them, by denying a complex reality in

which decolonized and decolonizing did not prove passive recipients of 'modernization,' and replacing it with 'proof,' in Black Panther's 'Americanization,' that Africa wants to, and will, align itself with the West; by framing Klaw as a villain in rhetorical repudiation of Soviet pro-decolonization rhetoric; and by figuring Africa, through Wakanda, as non-threatening to the West and its interests.

Thus, once the conflict is resolved, Black Panther worries that he will not be able to put away his uniform. He fears that Klaw will return (and bring neo-colonialism with him) or that something even worse will come next. In response, Mr. Fantastic tells Black Panther that '[t]he world will always have need of a dedicated, powerful fighter against injustice' (Lee et al. 1966b: 20). Black Panther immediately responds, echoing the FF's own pledge, with the US superheroes laying their hands on his back, as if blessing the covenant he makes with the United States and its 'providential' mission: 'I shall do it! Pledge my fortune, my powers–my very life–to the service of all mankind!' (**Figure 3**).

Black Panther's pledge is noteworthy because it responds not only to Mr. Fantastic, but also to Kennedy's (1961) inaugural, one of the most powerful articulations of the East-West divide to come out of the United States, of communism's supposed total opposition to freedom, and of the fervor and moral certainty of US

Figure 3: Lee, S. [w], Kirby, J. [a], & Sinnott, J. [i]. The Way it Began..!, *Fantastic Four* #53, August 1966. New York: Canam Publishers Sales Corp. © Marvel Comics.

anti-communism: 'Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe to assure the survival and the success of liberty.' By the end of these stories, then, Black Panther has become an honorary consensus culture 'American,' 'a free individual, charged by providence to serve the progress of freedom at home and around the world, defending against the evil forces of tyranny' (Costello 2009: 49; cf. Capitanio 2010: 265–266; Genter, 2007: *passim*.).

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

Notes

[1] Costello 2009: 1, for example, describes the Cold War as a 'bipolar division of the world' and the book never mentions the 'Third World.'

[2] For further reading, the reader can consult e.g. Wolf-Phillips 1987; Tomlinson 2003; Berger 2004. The discussion below builds on these sources.

[3] See for example the exchange between Charles Xavier and Magneto in *X-Men* #4 (March 1964; Lee et al. 1999) and the discussion of it in Lund 2015: paras. 8–9.

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