

Descendants of Kings and Queens: Black Panther and Entangled African Cosmopolitanism

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Building on the work of Frantz Fanon and Achille Mbembe, this talk traces the development of the Black Panther and Wakanda over the past 50 years. I assert that when T'Challa debuted in the pages of the Fantastic Four in 1966 he represented an emancipatory African cosmopolitanism that was as speculative and fanciful as the futuristic technology of Wakanda. However, while Lee and Kirby's impetus to create an African hero stems from a desire to illustrate the other—which is to say to represent racial alterity in a way that advances the hegemony of the post-WWII liberal American project that dominated the globe from 1948-2000—the evolution of Wakandan cosmopolitanism through the political vision of writers Don McGregor in the 1970s, Christopher Priest in the 1990s, Reginald Hudlin in the 2000s and Ta-Nehisi Coates' current run derives from a necessary desire to complicate the relativistic simplistic color-blind Cold War liberalism initially articulated by Lee and Kirby. Interestingly, T'Challa retained a broad appeal even as he became both more particularized and more politicized, demonstrating that comics retains the capacity for a space between the anodyne representations of typical superhero comics and the hyper-specificity of many graphic memoirs. The canny exploitation of this often overlooked middle space serves as the foundation for the global appeal of the Black Panther film.

Kurzbiographie

Jonathan W. Gray, Associate Professor of English at the CUNY Graduate Center and John Jay College, works on African American literary production and post-WWII American culture with an emphasis on popular culture including comic books, graphic novels, and other narratives of visual culture. His first book, *Civil Rights in the White Literary Imagination (Mississippi)* traces changes in white literary production during the period between the Brown case and the death of Martin Luther King. His forthcoming project, *Illustrating the Race (Columbia)*, investigates how the twin understandings of illustration—the creative act of depiction and the political act of bringing forth for public consideration—function in the representation of African Americans in comics and graphic narratives published since 1966. Prof. Gray co-edited the essay collection *Disability in Comics and Graphic Novels* for Palgrave MacMillan and served as the founding editor of the *Journal of Comics and Culture (Pace)*. Prof. Gray's journalism on popular culture has appeared in *The New Republic*, *Entertainment Weekly*, *Salon.com*, *Medium*, and the *New Inquiry*.