

# A Tale of Two Panthers

## *T'Challa and the Black Panther Party for Self-Defense*

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On January 14, 1970, wealthy New Yorkers gathered at the home of Leonard and Felicia Bernstein for a cocktail party fundraiser on behalf of 21 Black Panthers who were jailed and awaiting trial on possibly trumped-up charges. In 2017, writing recently in response to widespread criticism of Colin Kaepernick, Jamie Bernstein recalled the firestorm that greeted her parents' advocacy of the Panthers. According to Ms. Bernstein, her mother was the driving force behind the fundraiser, but contemporary press coverage in the *Times* society section insisted on placing her father center stage, archly describing how the world-famous conductor debated party philosophy with Black Panther leader Donald Cox in front of 90 guests before “hugging one another, agreeing that they were brothers, and having dinner together” (Curtis). The *Times*' editorial staff followed up a day later, condemning the “group-therapy plus fund-raising soirée” as “elegant slumming” that “mocked the memory of Martin Luther King, Jr.” (“False Note...”).

For the next few weeks the Jewish Defense League picketed the Bernsteins' building, but the incident would likely have been forgotten if not for the version that emerged five months later from the clattering typewriter of Tom Wolfe. Republished shortly afterward as the first half of *Radical Chic and Mau-Mauing the Flak-Catchers*, Wolfe's *New York Magazine* article commented sardonically on the presence of radicals sporting black leather jackets, dark glasses, and giant afros in a duplex apartment on the Upper East Side: “Wonder what the Black Panthers eat here on the hors d'oeuvre trail? Do the Panthers like little Roquefort cheese morsels wrapped in crushed nuts this way, and asparagus tips in mayonnaise dabs, and meatballs petites au Coq

Hardi, all of which are at this very moment being offered to them on gadrooned silver platters by maids in black uniforms with hand-ironed white aprons...” (ellipsis in original, here and elsewhere, except when marked by square brackets). But if Wolfe cast a sidelong aspersion at the supposedly Maoist Panthers enjoying the fruits of capitalist decadence, he reserved his real venom for the Bernsteins and their set. Ticking over a long list of recent liberal fundraisers in “this season of Radical Chic” (three parties for the Black Panthers, one for the Chicago Eight, and still others for grape workers, Irish activists, and the Young Lords), Wolfe perceived not the workings of social conscience but social competition, what right-leaning critics today call “virtue signaling.”

Curiously, Wolfe’s satirical recounting of the Bernsteins’ fête found its way into in the August 1971 issue of *The Incredible Hulk*. The comic opens with the Hulk turning up in New York Harbor and deciding to take a nap in the crook of Lady Liberty’s arm. He’s spotted soon afterward, and the military mobilizes—but holds off from approaching for fear of damage to the famous statue. At news of this standoff, a pair of wealthy Manhattan socialites spring into action: “Malicia my pet, it would appear that our social fortune is made. [...] Everyone who is anyone this season has given at least one fund-raising party for some socially-oppressed group. The Panthers, the grape-pickers, even the friends of the Earth. They’ve all been done. We are going to give such a party for ... the Hulk!” What follows is a reenactment of the Bernsteins’ fundraiser, with the Hulk standing in for the Panthers as a primal threat to the social order that nonetheless rouses liberal sympathies: “I just don’t see how the army can go on persecuting him that way,” says one woman, to whom another replies “Yes—just because he tears down an old building now and then!” (Thomas, “The Shoot Hulks...”). Readers likely agreed with this sentiment, since the Hulk of this era was a monster deserving sympathy: enormously destructive, yes, but innocently so. Yet these liberal fools plainly take sympathy too far when they attend a party menaced by that great green engine of destruction. Thus the comic turns up the heat of Wolfe’s satire, from wry irony to outright ridicule. And if it accuses Manhattan’s elite of being clueless, the comic insinuates something far darker in choosing to affiliate the Black Panthers with a creature of brooding rage.

What motivated writer Roy Thomas to take the Hulk on a one-issue detour into pointed political commentary? As a first clue, we might note that Thomas scripted this issue just a few months after sending T’Challa, Marvel’s Black Panther, home to Wakanda, thus ending the character’s three-year stint on the Avengers’ active roster. Thomas wrote every *Avengers* issue from 1968 through 1971, during which period the Black Panther Party was very much in the national spotlight. Fan scholar David Jefferson has probed the odd coincidence that the Black Panther, the world’s first black superhero, was

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created in 1966, the same year that the Black Panther Party formed in Oakland, California. But while Jefferson concludes that Jack Kirby and Stan Lee acted independently of Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, he does not consider how the Party impacted the hero once its local chapters spread across the nation and its legal troubles rendered it a cause célèbre.

As we shall see, by the time Black Panther joined the Avengers, writer Roy Thomas could hardly avoid addressing the issue of race in America. To Thomas's credit, race is explicitly referenced in about half of *Avengers* comics from this period and is central to four story arcs. By contrast, *Women's Lib* is addressed in just one, highly satirical issue (#83), while Vietnam receives no mention whatsoever. Yet Thomas' treatment of race in this period focused far more on the failings of black radicals than on the systematic injustices those activists sought to overcome. This, then, is the tale of two panthers, birthed independently but frequently confused with one another. Both radiated "cool" even as they burned hot with idealism, and both looked to Africa as a once-and-future black utopia. Yet their conflicting visions of America set them in mutual opposition.