

# Whiteness and the Colonial Origins of Americas First Superhero: Lee Falks The Phantom

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Aman, R., (2022), Whiteness and the Colonial Origins of Americas First Superhero: Lee Falks The Phantom, *Journal of Popular Culture*. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jpcu.13099>

Original publication available at:

<https://doi.org/10.1111/jpcu.13099>

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## **Whiteness and the Colonial Origins of America's First Superhero:**

### **Lee Falk's *The Phantom***

Robert Aman

The American superhero genre demonstrates a series of racial tropes intimately connected with whiteness. Although this may seem self-evident given the prevalence of superhero narratives that center on the protagonists' superior white bodies, Sean Guynes and Martin Lund (3) state that the relationship between whiteness and the American superhero is painfully unexplored. Notable exceptions include a small but ever-growing body of scholarship that spans from centering on a specific character—ranging from Superman (Regalado) and Captain America (Dittmer), to Spider-Man (Fu) and Batman (Brown)—to the genre at large (e.g., Guynes and Lund). What these studies have in common is that they predominately focus on contemporary runs or series and inevitably overlook the origins of the characters. This article aims to contribute to this important corpus of scholarship by focusing on the history of a character that is said to have given birth to the American superhero genre at large: Lee Falk's (1911–99) *The Phantom*. The argument advanced here is that not only have whiteness and racism been an integral part of the genre but also that the whole universe of America's first superhero has always been rooted in colonialism.

Although Jerry Siegel and Joe Schuster are often credited with laying the groundwork for what would become the genre and field of the superhero through their creation of Superman (Lund 1), Falk rejected such historiography. Instead, he considered himself the midwife to the genre, viewing mere imitations and cheap replicas in other superimposed crusaders. "After him came dozens of others," Falk later commented, "but no one as good" (119). Even if Superman also served as a model for countless duplications, it is nevertheless

true that when the Phantom made his debut as a newspaper comic strip in 1936 he was two years ahead of the Man of Steel and three years before Batman. Regardless of chronology, in addition to combining an outlandish costume with extraordinary deductive capacities and fighting skills, a particular bond that they all share is that they are all heterosexual white men. Additionally, whereas these superheroes from DC Comics—and eventually also from Marvel—have enjoyed global exposure far beyond comic book readers, the Phantom has predominantly played a role in the backwaters of readers’ consciousness in the United States (Patrick 3). This is not to suggest that *The Phantom* is not a commercial success or that it has not been adapted into other media forms. On the contrary, based on figures from the *Los Angeles Times* published in 1999, the Phantom appears in more than five hundred newspapers, has been translated into forty languages, and maintained back then 60 million readers daily. The first serial for the big screen based on the adventures of the Phantom was broadcast in 1943; a Hollywood blockbuster starring Billy Zane appeared in 1996; and a futuristic miniseries—in which the suit, as in the case of Iron Man, awards the Phantom special powers—premiered in 2009 to modest attention. Yet, the character’s popularity has predominately been restricted to other parts of the world. In a 1999 obituary of Falk in *The Guardian*, renowned comics journalist Paul Gravett mentions that the Phantom has become “a national institution in Australia, New Zealand and much of Scandinavia.”

Commentators note that part of Falk’s prodigy was to create a universe based on an amalgam of adventure movies, matinee serials, and pulp fiction novels, which may, at least partly, account for the character’s esteem among comic book readers in different corners of the world (Goulart 9). Kai Friese, discussing the Phantom’s popularity in India, especially underlines the ways in which Falk successfully borrowed from eighteenth- and nineteenth-century colonial adventure novels to add strength and dynamism to his plots. The backstory to the Phantom shares characteristics with both the castaway and the avenger story that have

been defined as emblematic of the adventure novel (Green 72). The story begins in 1525 with a vicious pirate attack on a British merchant ship outside the African coast. The lone survivor is the English nobleman Sir Christopher Walker, who is the son to the captain of the ship. If the Phantom saga starts out as a Robinson Crusoe alone in unfamiliar territory, it soon invokes tropes from Alexander Dumas's *The Count of Monte Cristo* wherein the protagonists seek revenge on those who have caused them severe ordeals. Washed up on a remote shore on the African coast, the last thing young Walker remembers before falling into the water is witnessing the killing of his father. Walker, however, will not limit himself to merely punishing pirates. Instead, he seeks revenge on the whole criminal underworld and swears a solemn oath on the skull of his father's murderer to devote his life to battle evil in all its forms. To ensure that there always will be a masked crime fighter breathing down the neck of rogues and murders, Walker also vows that the eldest male of each succeeding generation will follow in his footsteps. A dynasty of vigilantes is born. Consequently, the current Phantom is the twenty-first generation in this unbroken line; he keeps the myth alive among foes and villains across the globe that he is the same man and subsequently is believed to be immortal—hence his nickname “the Ghost Who Walks” (Aman 289).

In interviews, Falk himself traced the Phantom's origins to the literature he consumed growing up in Saint Louis, Missouri, during the early decades of the last century. This included the myths and legends of Robin Hood and King Arthur but also Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book* and Edgar Rice Burroughs's *Tarzan*. He later went as far as admitting that his own creation was basically “Tarzan with a college degree” (Friese 15). True is that *The Phantom*, like *Tarzan*, displays all the familiar tropes of the jungle adventure story. Readers of the comic enter a world of deep and unexplored jungle (at least, unexplored by westerners), protected by the Phantom's close allies in the Bandar pygmy tribe, whose name itself reveals Falk's insensitivity to questions of race and a history of racism. He borrowed the name from

“bandar-log,” which is the word Kipling used to describe the monkeys of the Seonee jungle in *The Jungle Book*. The hero himself resides in the Skull Cave, hidden behind a waterfall in a part of the jungle known as the Deep Woods, which houses the crypts of his ancestors and a library containing the hand-written accounts of his forefathers’ exploits referred to as the “Phantom Chronicles,” along with a vast treasure trove of prized possessions gifted to various members of the Phantom dynasty over the centuries (Aman 24).

In addition to ruling the humans in the jungle—the locals are careful not to break the Phantom’s declared peace, a *Pax Romana* in the tropics—the Phantom holds authority over the animal world: in his own island playground at Eden, he has taught carnivorous animals not to eat each other. In this reversed version of the “law of the jungle,” lions are following the same moral code that the Phantom seeks to instill in neighboring tribes, when he is not passing on similar moral lessons in the urban jungle of the capital Mawitaan in the fictional African nation state of Bangalla.

### **White Ruler**

The dense and exotic jungle the Phantom calls home is an appropriate stage set for European exploration. At least according to Richard Dyer, who argues that the jungle in colonial fiction, due to the difficulty of the terrain, its unfamiliarity, and dangers (savage beasts, ferocious animals, and starving cannibals), provides the opportunity for white protagonists to demonstrate their superiority by taming a landscape as wild as its environment and creatures (157). Moreover, colonial fiction energized the European myth of colonialism; they were, collectively, the bedtime stories the colonial powers told themselves before going to sleep at night (Green 3). These texts also share a role in perpetuating a discourse of the colonies as *terra nullius*: an empty void, a place of nothingness, before the advent of western eyes. In the case of Africa, this fantasy of the continent being without history was politically effective in

legitimizing colonialism (Aman 30). Not limited to adventure novels, ideas of African inferiority found their expression in the highest echelons of western thought and took on the contours of truth, from Hegel's verdict that African cultures were living in a state of timelessness in need of being woken up and Immanuel Kant's views on the rationality differentials between whites and blacks to John Locke's assumptions on the incapacity of primitive minds (Mills 59).

In his landmark study on colonial discourse, *The Invention of Africa*, V. Y. Mudimbe uncovers the ways in which the West effectively fabricated knowledge about Africa, thereby determining the understanding of it, as well as providing the foundation for its subsequent imperialist rule. In Mudimbe's view, Africa—or, rather, “Africa”—is a creation of an intricate network of writing that stretches from literary, historical, scholarly accounts to political, military, and imperial administrative mechanisms. The former produced Africa for the ensuing acquisition by the latter. European culture, Mudimbe contends, gained its strength and identity by positioning itself as the contrasting image of other regions and cultures around the world. In more clear-cut terms, the colonial populations provided the mirror in which Europe could perceive itself as civilized, enlightened, and superior in contrast to an uncivilized, primitive, and inferior Other. In the case of Africa, explorers—anthropologists, writers, and missionaries—brought back new proof that could explicate “African inferiority” (Mudimbe 1–2, 4–5, 17–22).

Comic books are no exception. The decades following the late 1930s saw a flood of comic books about heroes that made the jump to Africa (Aman; Bongco; Young). *The Phantom* would soon be joined on the shelves by *Sheena, Queen of the Jungle*, *Jungle Jim*, *Kaanga Jungle King*, and *Wambi Jungle Boy*, to mention but a few of the many. According to Bradford Wright, characteristic of the genre of jungle comics is that it “posed justification for western colonial domination and white supremacy through violence” (36–37). They provided

readers with the “rawness and savagery” of Africanism that Toni Morrison defines as necessary for the elaboration of the quintessential American identity (37). To be American means to be white, which transpires into the idea of the archetypical American superhero. For much of the genre’s existence, to be a superhero has always implied a white male identity. In the case of *The Phantom*, white supremacy is especially pervasive in the paternalistic relationship that the Phantom dynasty has established over the centuries with the apparently primitive and uncivilized people of the jungle. According to Charles Mills, *The Phantom* comic exemplifies the colonial logic in general with a white man guiding the lesser species unable to bear democracy and incapable of autonomy and self-rule: “We would be helpless! Without the Phantom’s peace, there would be wars—killing” (57). Guran, the Phantom’s best friend and chief of the Bandar tribe, once commented on the essentialness of the Phantom’s authority in the jungle: “He is our protector.”

### **The Ghost Who Walks into World War II**

When Marc Singer made the general argument that superhero comics have a “long history of excluding, trivializing, or ‘tokenizing’ minorities,” (107) he could easily have been referring to *The Phantom*. Yet, Falk turned a deaf ear to accusations of racism for decades. Asked in 1964 to comment on allegations about racial stereotyping in the series, Falk was “baffled” by such claims, adding, “I actually cannot see one hint of racism in my stories” (78–79).

However, in 1988, he admitted to negative representations, affirming that “we were racists back then,” where the use of a general “we” can be read as a rhetorical strategy to limit his individual responsibility by alluding to a claimed dominant way of thinking (223). Contrary to what may be expected, the racist representations to which he admits do not include the black population surrounding the Phantom in the jungle. Instead, Falk’s confession of racism is limited to Japan.

“I really didn’t like the Japanese,” Falk explained in an interview in 1988, “After Pearl Harbor and the prison camps, we treated them as the crooks they were” (223). Published in 1942–43, during the aftermath of Japan’s attack on the Hawaiian naval base, *The Inexorables* is a daily strip filled with the rage and indignation of a nation that has been attacked. Instead of Pearl Harbor, the Japanese invade Bangalla in the hopes of cutting off Allied supply lines. The Phantom is faced with the challenge of holding off the large Japanese armies while awaiting support from the Allies. As the authoritative voice of the jungle, he summons all chiefs and demands that they join him in battle against the menace from the East. Although no explicit references are made to America throughout the storyline, the words coming out of the Phantom’s mouth allude to a loosely defined Americanism synonymous with lofty ideals of democracy, liberty, and freedom. This is done by way of drawing a divining line between “free men” and those who are “taught to obey without thinking,” (Falk and Moore 39) caricaturizing differences between liberal democracies and their antithesis in the form of militarism, oppression, and intolerance perpetrated by the Axis powers (Wright 42–45).

In line with the racist color metaphor of the “Yellow Peril,” which depicts people from Asia as a menace to the West, the Japanese soldiers are brutal and merciless, and they do not hesitate to torture their prisoners, men and women alike (“We know no law. Only the law of the knife! So... speak... while you can!”) (16). To defend Bangalla from the Asian invaders, the Phantom goes as far as to violate the very rule he has promised not to break: to kill. His American sweetheart and wife-to-be Diana Palmer, with tears in her eyes, listens carefully as the Phantom laconically justifies his reconsidering of ethical principles (“This is war.”) (44). Extraordinary circumstances seem to require equally extraordinary measures.

In addition to Falk’s script, Ray Moore’s drawings rely heavily on racist caricatures. Comic books were an integral part of the Allied propaganda machine during World War II. Writers coined epithets like “Japanazi” and artists drew vicious Japanese soldiers with thick

glasses and prominent teeth (Savage 10). Perhaps more than any other medium, Wright contends, comic books were particularly suited to represent the Asian enemy as many Americans saw them: sinister and merciless subhuman creatures who deserve nothing but violence, if not extinction. The cover of the summer 1943 issue of *The Human Torch* is a case in point as the flaming hero burns the arm off a Japanese soldier to prevent him from torturing a white woman with a sword.<sup>i</sup> The pages in other superhero comics contained similar visual representations in combination with racial anti-Japanese slurs. Captain America notoriously referred to a Japanese soldier as “yellow monkey”; Wonder Woman fought her stereotypically Asian nemesis Egg-Fu; and the Justice Society of America threw the word “Jap” around when intervening against malicious Japanese militaries.<sup>ii</sup>

On one level, it hardly comes as a surprise that comic books created just before or during World War II sought to take advantage of nationalist sentiments expressing racist views. Nevertheless, as Caroline Bressey makes abundantly clear, it is not enough to merely suggest that “this is how it was” or, to paraphrase Falk, claim that “this is how we were.” After all, strong antiracist sentiments were expressed against bigoted slurs in public, although public memory often conveniently neglects these events (35). In the case of *The Phantom*, critics had targeted the racial politics of the comic book as early as 1943 for its frequent portrayal of black people as “ignorant, superstitious colored people” and for propagating “hatred and mistrust of foreign people” (Kessel 350). This includes having people of color speak a stuttered and broken English. Falk, however, took pride in having a large cast of black characters, repeatedly pointing to his other creation *Mandrake the Magician* as evidence that he was the first creator to have a black character in a leading role. What Falk refers to is the constant presence in Mandrake’s life that is Lothar. With more muscles than brain, the black Lothar starts out as the white Mandrake’s simple-minded helper (even occasionally referred to as “giant black slave”), before being promoted to best friend and loyal crime solving partner.

When Fred Fredericks replaced Phil Davis as the main artist of the series in 1964, Lothar received a new outfit as his small shorts, leopard skin, and fez were substituted for a shirt and pants. The new clothes completed his evolution from primitive to modern as another noticeable change in the character was his sudden ability to now speak Standard American English.

Albeit on an equally superficial level, Falk made changes to the Phantom's universe as he gradually polished the imperialist framing of the storyline, turning Bangalla into a postcolonial state and replacing the nameless and numberless tribesmen with a new supporting cast of characters of color. Apart from longtime sidekick Guran, these included the new president of the nation, the progressive Dr. Lamanda Luaga; the Angela Davis-esque teacher, Miss Tagama; and Colonel Worubu who took over from the white Colonel Weeks as head of the Jungle Patrol (an elite paramilitary force modeled on the French Foreign Legion that helps the Phantom police the dense wilderness of the Deep Woods), to mention a few of the more salient initiatives (Friese 13). However, all of this was done without necessarily allowing Falk's insights into past sins to push his lead character to openly condemn racist policies. Nonetheless, as Keith Aoki contends, deeply held racist images of Asians share troubling historical roots with widely circulated representations of other minoritized groups (14). Striking parallels exist throughout American history in popular culture through representations of degrading racial stereotypes of black, Hispanic, and Indigenous people (e.g., Costello; Savage; Strömberg).

Falk, however, maintained that African Americans loved the Phantom "because he has always seen black people as equal human beings" (78). Even if Falk himself is firm in his belief that he produced a progressive and possibly antiracist comic book due to what he refers to as the symmetry and respect characterizing the Phantom's relationship with black Africans, the plot nonetheless offers a prime example of what is conceptualized as a "white savior

complex” (Fitzgerald 79). If Eurocentrism and cultural supremacy have produced a sense among westerners that they live at the center of the world, that they have a responsibility to help others, and that “people from other parts of the world are not fully global” as Gayatri Spivak suggests (23), this holds equally true on the pages of comic books. The trope of the “white savior” is so intensely entrenched in western popular culture, Matthew Hughey claims, that varied intercultural contacts are often guided by a racial logic that separates people into those who are redeemers (white people) and those in need of redemption (everyone else) (12). Nowhere is this more apparent than in the storyline on how a sixteenth-century British sailor became the first Phantom.

### **The Resurrection of Christopher Walker**

Although Falk never employed reboots to clean the slate and radically alter the storyline in tune with changing social mores, Kevin Patrick argues that another concrete example of Falk’s updated political views is his rewriting of the origin story of how the pygmy tribe, the Bandars, came to be his trusted allies with the episode “The First Phantom” from 1975 (23). Despite this attempt on behalf of Falk to push the comic book in a progressive direction in keeping with the times, the story enhances the white savior complex rather than challenging it.

Back on the shore, the encounter between the wounded and exhausted English survivor and the members of the pygmy tribe that find him has a broader backstory. Instead of leading the white stranger directly to the hidden and remote Skull Cave, he is informed that the Bandars are the slaves of another local tribe (“as they nursed me to health . . . they explained . . . they were a small band who’d escaped their masters”): the Wasaka (4). With resemblances to European colonialists, the Wasaka exploit the Bandars as forced labor. Their only hope was, as explained by the caption, the old legend of a liberator emerging from the

sea. As they discover Walker's wounded body on the beach, the Bandars are certain that their prayers have finally been answered. Enhanced by artwork filled with hefty tones of Christian symbolism, the Messiah arrives to an unholy land and, just like Christ, the white man gets up and stretches out his arms in a welcoming gesture to the recipients of his words—words with a solemn promise to help them against their oppressors (“I’ll try to free your people”) (5). Another similarity to Christ is that Walker's motives are altruistic to such an extent that his actions in the service of humanity will bring him devoted followers for centuries. Each new generation of the Phantom dynasty can count on the loyal and faithful support of the Bandars.

Walker's elevated social status manifests itself as he prepares an attack to free the Bandars from their oppressors once and for all. In fact, the relationship between the Phantom and the Bandars exemplifies, in miniature, certain versions of colonial discourse. It enacts a fantasy of western superiority being willingly recognized and rewarded by the “natives,” typical in western writing about Africa. Walker may have arrived as a castaway outsider, but he is adopted by the Bandars who project their hopes and dreams onto him. Walker establishes first his fellowship, then his superiority (on the prevailing first-amongst-equals model recognized by the Bandars), and then his benign mastery (Torgovnick 57). To underscore the voluntary basis on which the Bandars recognize the white man's racial superiority, the next panels show frightened warriors pleading with Walker to lead them in battle (“We are afraid . . . we cannot fight the giants . . . unless you lead us”) (9). True to his biblical status among the locals, Walker's reaction evokes a familiar verse from the Old Testament: “When he saw the crowds, he had compassion on them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd” (Matthew 9:36).

As a benign master, Walker, assuming the white man's burden of leading the Bandars, teaches his “children” skills he deems useful, focusing on how they can use the surrounding landscape to their advantage. When informed that a local berry is poisonous, he dips arrows in

the fruit juice and thereby creates the weapon that will instill fear in the jungle for centuries. This is in itself a persistent trope in jungle comics with the lone purpose of enhancing white supremacy (Wright 36–37). Despite Walker’s western origin, he understands the terrain better than the people who inhabit it. Consequently, the reader is assured that part of the Bandars’ redemption—as well as their future elevated status—is a consequence of a single white man’s superior logical thinking and mastery of nature that enables him to make use of the local flora to their benefit. In short, the Bandars inform and Walker draws conclusions. In addition to the poisonous arrows, Walker sews an outfit resembling a totem statue in the Wasaka village which, the caption reveals, becomes the first Phantom costume. Loyal to a western representation of inhabitants in Africa as inherently superstitious and irrational, the mere sight of Walker in his costume makes the Wasaka tremble with fear, immediately accepting the release of all slaves. As a token of their gratitude, the Bandars show Walker a cave carved into the shape of a skull and ask him to stay and live with them. We already know his answer.

### **Treasure Hunting in the Americas**

Although the previous sections have discussed in detail the ways in which colonial discourse is ingrained into the Phantom universe, this has thus far been done without overt references to colonialism itself. Nevertheless, the argument can equally be made that the backstory to the Phantom mythology is structured around colonialism. Most notably, Edward Said has shown how profoundly imperialism structures western literary culture, to the extent that many esteemed works assume and depend on the existence of empire for the lifestyles of the characters and for plot reversals and resolutions, regardless of whether or not the text itself has an apparent interest in imperialism (82–84).

In the case of the *Phantom*, the references to colonialism are more explicit. Although the European export of slaves from Africa commenced in the fifteenth century, it was not

until the early 1600s that the English fully entered the colonial enterprise and the subsequent triangular trade (Adler and Pouwels 356). Without any available information regarding a possible employer from elsewhere, it seems unfair to suggest, or even insinuate, that the British merchant ship carrying Captain Christopher Walker and his son, who will become the first Phantom, is actively participating in the slave-based colonial economy. After all, neither Falk nor any other Phantom writer has explored this part of the dynasty's backstory. Yet, in line with Said's analysis above, empire building is still key to the plot as it determines the lifestyles of the protagonists and reversals in the story. This holds especially true in the case of the first Phantom's father.

One of the few stories focusing on his life, the Sunday strip from 1969 "Walker's Table," reveals that, as a youngster in 1492, the father of the first Phantom enrolled as cabin boy with Christopher Columbus on the voyage to find a new sea route to Asia but ended up ashore in the Americas. The Phantom reads aloud from the chronicles of his ancestor, a recurrent narrative mode Falk employs in stories building on past members of the Phantom dynasty; the image shows the cabin boy Walker standing right next to Columbus, about to make landfall on shores previously unknown to Europeans. In line with the colonialist presupposition that the land and its resources belong to those who are best able to exploit them according to the values and interests of European commercial and industrial systems (Spurr 31), the following panel zooms in on the Italian explorer as he baptizes the island "San Salvador" while pronouncing that it is now property of the Spanish Crown. The conquest of America had begun.

Yet, Columbus seems disillusioned. The Phantom's narrative voice explains that the adventurous sea captain was expecting "gold-roofed palaces and silk-clad courtiers" but instead encounters "rude huts and naked savages" (5). A possible source of small comfort to Columbus is that Walker, in a textbook example of sidestepping all complexities of

intercultural contact, settles in with ease: he immediately picks up the language, grows accustomed to the local seeds, and learns the local rituals (“He learned the native tongue—became a translator”) (6). When the time comes for Columbus to return to Spain, Walker decides to stay. A panel shows a waving Columbus aboard his ship, saying farewell to his loyal cabin boy as the caption announces that “Columbus returned to Spain on board ‘La Niña’. He brought with him 10 natives, parrots, lizards . . . but no gold” (6). It is also noteworthy that this description of the cargo on board La Niña mentions the forced transportation of humans alongside birds and reptiles. For readers who may have wished to see Walker object to the shipping of living cargo, the next panel is a disappointment. Walker discloses to a native friend, Caribo, that his reason for remaining a settler comes down to his desire to feed Columbus’s appetite for gold. Walker explains while waving back to Columbus, “I want to help him. He believes there are golden cities in the west! We will find them for him!” (6).

The grammatical use of personal pronouns is key in Walker’s statement in order to grapple with implicit messages of white supremacy. After proclaiming that *he* wants to help Columbus, Walker instantly informs Caribo that *they* are going to find the golden cities for him. In spite of their friendship, the hierarchies between the white European visitor and the brown Indigenous local is clear: the former instructs and the latter obeys. With a local by his side who immediately slips into the position of loyal servant—this episode’s equivalent of Robinson Crusoe’s Friday, the Lone Ranger’s Tonto, or more closely related, the Phantom’s Guran—the cabin boy Walker sets out on a journey around parts of today’s Central and North America and, akin to the conquistadors who would follow in his footsteps just a few years later, he is determined to locate cities enshrined in gold.

An entire tradition in western literature, from captivity stories, such as Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* and James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans* to Arthur

Conan Doyle's *The Lost World* and E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India*, has been built around this penetration of the interior spaces of non-European people. Faithful to this literary tradition, Walker entering the interior ensures a confrontation of cultures takes place face-to-face, or rather eye-to-eye, between clothed Europe and naked America, between civilization and wilderness. What is interesting here is not that the expedition turns out to be in vain—they never find any gold—but the ways in which the Indigenous population is represented as they encounter the Mayas. As evasive as the script is in pointing out the effects that the arrival of Columbus would have on the Indigenous population—genocide, enslavement, diseases, and plundering—Falk is keen to highlight the less flattering cultural practices of the Mayas. Unlike, to use the Phantom's narrative voice, the "naked savages" in their "rude huts," the European expedition first discovers that "the Mayans created a great civilization," but soon moves over to affirm their taste for "human sacrifice." Consequently, the reader does not have to turn the page before Caribo is captured by the Mayas, who decide to sacrifice him to the gods.

Another vital narrative trope in the great European eighteenth and nineteenth-century adventure novel is the fantasy of fear: the risk of being imprisoned or ritually slaughtered by remote and strange brutes. The theme's persistent popularity in literature, however, does little to dispel the fact that it remains, as Jan Nederveen Pieterse contends, "the most worn-out cliché about non-western peoples" (114). Nevertheless, the platitude of the motif is possibly of minor comfort to Caribo as he is chained to an altar, ready to be sacrificed as a gift to pagan gods. Just in the nick of time before the dagger penetrates his heart, Walker intervenes by firing shots from his rifle in the air as the caption underlines both his braveness and his undivided loyalty to his indigenous friends ("Kit was risking his own life. But he had to try to help his friend") (8).

The sound of gunfire scares the Mayas, who had never seen or heard a firearm before. The Phantom, reading aloud from the chronicles, explains to his stunned wife that this was “[a] historic moment. The first sound of gunfire in America!” while also declaring that his ancestor’s journey as a whole is “one of the greatest unrecorded adventures in all history” (9). Besides revealing the Phantom’s privileged locus of enunciation (deciding what renders an event historical is always done from a position of power), the declaration also determines from where he speaks. Even if he resides in Bangalla, the Phantom narrates history from the geopolitical locus of the West—implying that Falk writes with an exclusively western audience in mind—in which gun smoke signals the advent of modernity to the American continent. This is not to suggest that high-quality firearms, within as well as beyond the comic pages, did not facilitate their imperial expansion in conquering the Americas for the Spanish and Portuguese armies (Burbank and Cooper 163) but describes how they carry a certain symbolic meaning.

To reveal the geopolitical perspective from which history tends to be written, Eric Wolf uses “People without History,” a metaphor that emphasizes the epistemic power differential that placed both continents and people outside of history before the arrival of European eyes to testify to their existence (18). In this sense, being part of history is a privilege of European modernity, which also explains why today the narratives of modernity almost universally point to Europe as the principal site where, to borrow from Homi Bhabha, “newness enters the world” (301). Gunfire, then, is read as a token technological advancement, further degrees of modernization, based on certain European parameters of development. Hence, the Phantom becomes the authoritative voice, in a self-congratulatory mode, writing the history of people claimed to be without by sanctioning how “newness” entered what is (from a European horizon) the “New World” with his ancestor’s great, yet undocumented, arrival in the capital of the Mayas and the subsequent shots fired. In short,

instead of connecting the presence of the white European among the Mayas to the forthcoming history of Europe cutting open the veins of the Indigenous populations by initiating the destruction of their empires, stripping a whole continent of memories, exuberance and manpower, a symbol of that destruction—the import of guns to the Americas—is here celebrated while simultaneously silencing and marginalizing crucial aspects of reality (Aman 37).

The gunfire is nonetheless a successful derivative maneuver as the two friends make their escape. However, they are in for a final surprise. The sight of Walker, in combination with his thunderous rifle, makes the Indigenous troops worship the white man. Raising their hands to the sky, they bow to his pale-skinned presence. He was, the caption explains, unaware of “the legend among these people—of the golden haired god” (10).

Beyond continuous allegiance to the colonialist adventure novel, this sequence follows two well-proven tropes in western writings on non-European people. Although the Phantom accredits the Mayas with having created “a great civilization,” the emphasis on their bestiality and the wildness of the Indigenous population (the ritual sacrificing of humans), as well as their superstition and ignorance (confusing a human being with God), serves to point out their shorthanded development as human beings—in short, how *they* are different from *us*. From the angle of cultural evolutionism applied to other regions in colonial discourse, they are caught in a midway stage between the primitive and the civilized. Additionally, the passage illustrates the courageousness and loyalty of the white European who refuses to leave his friend behind, risking his own life in the process. For readers who are already acquainted with generations of Kit Walker’s future offspring, this comes as no great surprise.

Although Falk uses the sequence to demonstrate how altruism and heroism ran in the family even before the Phantom dynasty began, several academic commentators have uncovered the motif of what Spivak, with customary sharpness, has formulated as “white men

saving brown women from brown men” (297); that is, the narrative in which privileged white subjects enter another cultural context and rescue Others from their plight. Kit Walker is the white man rescuing—being a savior is almost always a masculine position—whereas the gender Caribo identifies with is of minor importance. After all, to need rescuing is, Brenda Boyle explains, to be feminine (149). A stalwart theme of colonial discourse is, while casting Europe as dominant patriarchal force, the feminizing of the other continents and their inhabitants to produce the colonized as a feminized Other (McClintock 27). In this sense, the two friends, Kit and Caribo, play their respective roles to perfection. The white masculine hero saves the feminized brown man from other brown men.

Falk’s evasiveness when it comes to pointing out the numbing ghastliness of colonialism comes to the fore as the Phantom continues to explain to his wife that Kit and Caribo never made it to the golden city, which they believed to be Tenochtitlan, capital of the Aztec Empire. With the resolution to the adventure being that the two friends eventually make an even greater discovery—Walker’s Table, a mesa with a cave on top of it, becoming the Phantom dynasty’s oldest hideout in North America—the script also confirms the presence of gold in Tenochtitlan (“There was much gold there!”) with an acknowledgement of who discovered it instead (“Cortez would find it 25 years later.”) (10). In the Phantom’s narration, Cortés was the one who “found” the gold and therefore beat his ancestor, as well as any other European, to the prize.

The pursuit and hunt for gold on foreign soil is thereby presented as a treasure hunt, a big game played by white Europeans on a foreign continent reduced to a game board, determined by which one of the competing actors is first to discover the hidden fortune. In shying away from a language that with accuracy captures the murders, rapes, plundering and enslavement enacted on behalf of the gold-smitten conquistadors—or even addresses the fact that someone, a whole civilization to be more concrete, had already discovered and mined the

gold—there is little to suggest that the Phantom, like his ancestor, regards the land of the Aztecs to be any different from Cortés, or as David Livingstone viewed Sigunga, as western civilizations traditionally view “primitive” land and cultures—as treasure troves, as the observers’ rightful possession (Torgovnick 61).

The point here is not to make a Hernán Cortés of Lee Falk, or to suggest that the latter was unapologetic to the violence enacted by the former, but to show that Walker, in his desired action to discover gold on a foreign continent, replicates the actions of colonialism without necessarily approving of colonialism itself. A similar verdict has been returned against Falk. In his analysis of *The Phantom*, Friese diagnoses Falk as someone in love with colonial fiction, not colonies (15). While this may explain the appropriation of the frequent narrative patterns in colonial literature laid bare in this article—including the social and racial boundaries drawn between westerners and non-westerners in today’s Africa and Latin America—my task here has also been to uncover the Phantom’s ambivalent relationship to colonialism.

If this episode encapsulates the first ancestor of the family line in the colonial enterprise through his active participation in the subsequent colonization of the Americas, a similar connection can be made, relating back to Said’s thesis on many western literary works’ dependence on colonialism (84), on how the dynasty ended up in Bangalla. Even if, as previously mentioned, there is little to link the Walker dynasty to the slave trade, the connection to colonialism is explicitly made. At the time the Walkers sail off, England sought trading posts, predominately in Africa, to support its domestic economy, which means that empire building is central to the reasons why the Walkers are on a merchant ship off the African coast in the first place before succumbing to the pirate attack that initiates the Phantom dynasty. Not only is the Phantom dynasty more or less the same age as colonialism,

without it the dynasty would not exist. The first American superhero is thus a product of colonialism.

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<sup>i</sup> *The Human Torch* #12. Cover by Alex Schomburg, Marvel Comics, 1943.

<sup>ii</sup> These examples of anti-Japanese slurs are from the following comic books: *Captain America* #6. By Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, illustrated by Joe Simon and Jack Kirby, Marvel Comics, 1941; *Wonder Woman* #19. By Joye Murchison, illustrated by Harry G. Peter, DC Comics, 1946; *All Star Comics* #12. By Gardener Fox, illustrated by Jack Burnley, Sheldon Moldoff, Cliff Young, Ben Flinton, Bernard Klein, Stan Aschmeier and Bernard Baily, DC Comics, 1942.