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THE FATAL FEMME FATALE

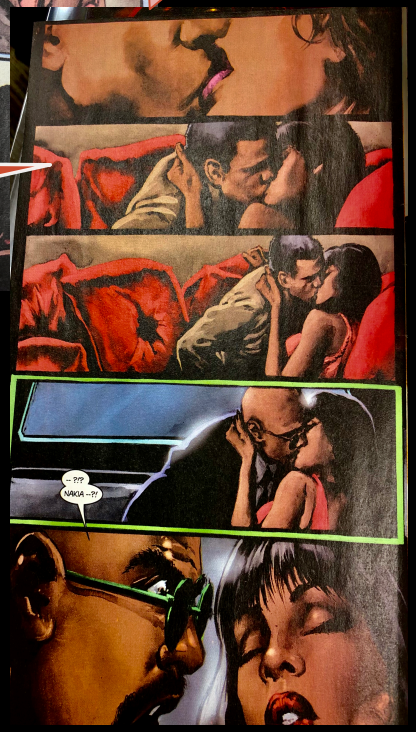
Deconstruction of the “Romantic Interest”

Jillian Schupbach



KISS

SMOOCH



The *Black Panther* comics have been praised for being extremely progressive in their support of a black protagonist. However, one thing that they fall short in is the continuation of a misogynistic narrative which puts characters like Monica Lynne in a position where they only exist to further the narrative of a male protagonist.

Lynne, who was written into the comics in the early 1970s, was featured mostly in steamy sex scenes with T'Challa. When she wasn't scantily clad or telling him to call her "master" (which seems strange on a whole other level), she was being rescued from the clutches of evil after being used as bait, or singing at dive bars about love and romance. Her continuation of the femme fatale archetype led to her killing off in 2018, when she no longer seemed to serve a purpose and T'Challa had been married to/dating/seeing several other, much more powerful women.

HOT

Some fans recall Lynne fondly, but it's my personal opinion that these fans deserve better.

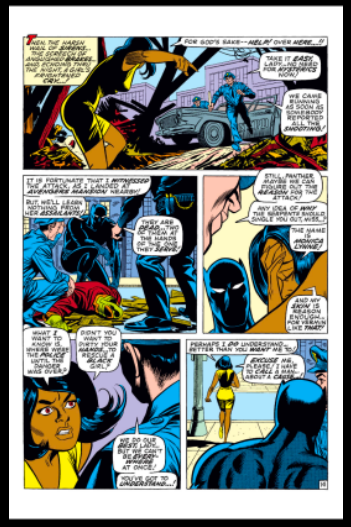
MIC DROP

Lynne's character is not only limited in her own personification, but she also serves to limit the means by which other black characters are represented. She has set and carried on a precedent that is damaging to women overall, and detrimental to women of color. If we're to keep from repeating the same mistakes, the femme fatale narrative must die just as Lynne did. Despite the creation of strong black characters, both male and female, the comics still fail to avoid the femme fatale narrative, which belittles women and treats them solely as sexual objects who exist to further the narrative of the male hero. Monica Lynne is a prime example of this: in the 1970s comics, she is featured and posed as the token damsel in distress character, written entirely for T'Challa to rescue over and over, and then killed off and discarded when she no longer serves this purpose. Her creation is inspired solely by a need for T'Challa to have a glamorous romantic interest and to bolster his storyline. As for her impact, it seems that the only effect she's had is reinforcing a narrative which is harmful to women, especially black women searching for positive representation. Storm, who is also a love interest of T'Challa's, serves as a sort of foil for Lynne in that she has her own means of saving herself throughout her narrative, and that she is a vigilante herself. However, she is still not represented in a way that is entirely beneficial. Shuri and T'Challa, both characters with their own agencies, personalities, and stories, will also serve somewhat as foils, but are also negatively impacted by Lynne's presence in the story. Finally, Romanda is another black woman - this time a woman with strong political influence that one could argue may not be as present in Lynne - through which T'Challa's narrative as a male superhero is reinforced.









The answer is plain and simple: there is an established trope for women in comic books, and even as progress continues to be made for female characters, the mold still refuses to be broken. Characters like Lois Lane established a norm, and Monica Lynne followed suit. She may have been revolutionary for black women at the time she was introduced, but looking back now, her character is demeaning and misogynistic, and overall unsatisfactory.





Stan Lee is credited with creating the Black Panther, along with 200 other Marvel characters. He "rose through the ranks" of Marvel Comics, becoming its primary creative director and allowing it to become "a multimedia corporation that dominated the comics industry" (Wikipedia 1).





In his lifetime, he created powerful superhero characters, including Iron Man, Spiderman, the Hulk, and many others which are now icons of popular culture.



One thing which he has been criticized for, despite being beloved by generations of comic book fans, is the way in which Marvel seems to snub female superheroes and characters (Bocco 1).

REACTIONS:

"not a single film out of 19 movies has featured women for more than 40 percent of the runtime" (Sharf 1).

"We need better representation. Yes, the women in these films are, most of the time, badass. But too often, they're just sidekicks or love interests, and they still don't get to tell their own stories. We hope that *Black Panther* paved the way for a new phase of better, more inclusive and better written films. Better be careful, Marvel. *Wonder Woman 2* will come out before your hypothetical Black Widow solo movie, and it may smash your reputation again" (Bocco 1).

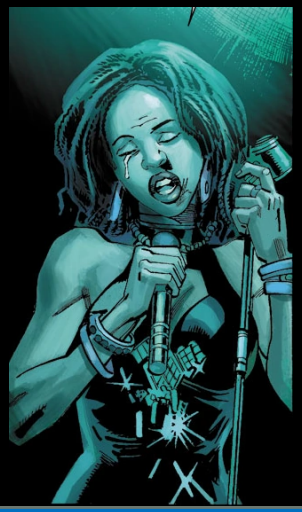
"Black Panther's women are allowed to be strong, vulnerable, capable, loving and loved all at the same time... I didn't expect them to have that much agency because . . . well, the women in Marvel movies hardly ever do. Even the most famous female Marvel characters are eventually reduced to being the background to their male counterparts' foreground" (Danee 2).



One fan of Marvel in particular, Federica Bocco, claims that *Black Panther* (the 2018 movie, that is) is not a victim of the misogynistic trope under which Marvel often operates. While I agree with this, I do believe that the comics upon which the movie are based are what need looking into in terms of misogyny. Bocco says, on behalf of female comic fans everywhere: "Marvel is unfair to women and this is not negotiable. (Please note that **Black Panther** is pretty much exempt from the following rant)" (Bocco 1).

LEARNING FROM MONICA LYNNE: How can female characters be represented better in the future?

If it is truly the case that T'Challa and Monica Lynne's relationship ended and her character faded out because the comic book creators wanted to introduce a more powerful, better-represented woman, why continue to oversexualize Storm?





Not to mention that even Storm's marriage to T'Challa was annulled by T'Challa without her consent or knowledge. Why make this choice if the point of introducing Storm was to include a more powerful love interest?

IS IT POSSIBLE, THEN, THAT THE REASON MONICA LYNNE IS WRITTEN THE WAY SHE IS IS TO SERVE THE ASPECT OF "NORMALIZATION" OF "REGULAR" BLACK CHARACTERS IN COMICS?





If this is the case, then it only makes sense to eventually move T'Challa away from his engagement with her in favor of a better-written, better-represented female character. Right?
Well, maybe not so much.
Storm is sexualized in a way that is very similar to Lynne. Just because Storm is a superhero and a powerful character doesn't mean she's a powerful woman, or that she's being represented positively.



Monica Lynne is probably one of the least recognized, and most affected, characters in *Black Panther* when it comes to the demotion of female characters to love interests or femme fatale types.

CRY



SING



WHY WASN'T LYNNE IN THE MOVIE?

"T'Challa first met Monica Lynne in Avengers #73, saving her from an attack by a gang known as the Sons of the Serpent. She is an American jazz singer who eventually became Black Panther's fiancé, but their engagement was eventually broken off. Considering the fact that the film doesn't actually have any scenes with T'Challa in America, creating that relationship in the **Marvel Cinematic Universe** probably would have resulted in a very different film than the one we got. Considering the quality of the final product, and the wonderful chemistry between **Lupita Nyong'o** and Chadwick Boseman, it seems like they ultimately made the proper choice"

Statement from a creator of the *Black Panther* movie: "There might have been a few characters that we early on thought about incorporating... I'm spacing on the name of it. We thought about a different love interest for Panther at one point very early on... She's the singer. There was a different love interest from the canon that we thought about. It was just a part of a conversation. But we ultimately ended up not playing with that character" (Eisenberg 1).

THE FEMME FATALE NARRATIVE

Even despite Lynne's misogynistic portrayal, fans still identify and sympathize with her and her treatment at the hands of the comics. This romantic interest archetype is a recognized character in comics – and in literature in general – and fans like that. They wish, in many cases, that T'Challa would have married her.

WHY WOULD A WRITER CHOOSE TO CONTINUE THIS NARRATIVE?

Monica represents the same archetype that Lois Lane and Mary Jane Watson both do: they are the romantic interest, the girl who gets saved by the hero. But this narrative is harmful to female characters, especially women of color.



When *Black Panther* first introduced Lynne, it was becoming more common in the comics world for black characters to be represented in "normalized" ways, so it makes sense that her narrative works the way that it does.

Monica's Character: what is her impact on these other characters and how they're represented?

SHURI –Even despite her humanity and the comics' allowance for her empowerment, she is still oversexualized in her Black Panther costume. Parts of her body are aggrandized and accentuated in order to appeal to the male gaze. Black women are more likely to fall victim to this trope in comics (Brown 133). Lynne's oversexualization normalizes this narrative for black women, which allows it to continue on in Shuri. Finally, When Shuri does become the Black Panther after taking over from T'Challa, the narrative is driven largely by T'Challa's whereabouts and his mistakes and his time as the Black Panther. Shuri is still overshadowed by her male counterpart, a narrative which Lynne's character only serves to reinforce.

T'CHALLA – As a result of Lynne's presence in *Black Panther*, T'Challa is given a motivation to fight "the bad guys"; saving his romantic interest elevates him as the male hero. The fact is that Monica Lynne's blackness has more of an impact on him than her gender; as a black woman, she is more likely to be oversexualized in the comics than her white counterparts (who are still oversexualized as well). Lynne not being allowed to have any sort of identity outside of her sex appeal is degrading to her as a character, suggesting that black characters are only allowed to be one thing. T'Challa is not as limited by this as he could potentially be, but it still could have an effect on the way he's written.

RAMONDA - As Queen of Wakanda, Ramonda has a significant amount of power and political sway. She is used by villains, most typically, not primarily as a way to intimidate the nation of Wakanda, but instead to intimidate T'Challa. Granted, T'Challa also does become King of Wakanda, but it would still be correct to say that her significance as a woman in power is often overshadowed in the comics by T'Challa's power as a man. Lynne's narrative focuses mostly (if not solely) on T'Challa, which reinforces that his narrative is the most vital.

STORM – Finally, Storm's relationship with T'Challa is obviously going to be informed by Monica Lynne's, as T'Challa's former girlfriend helped to establish a norm for how romantic counterparts are handled in the comics. In some moments, Storm seems godlike, and is even called a "goddess" before she comes to join the X-Men. However, when she is with T'Challa, or even when she is with other men in general, she is often rendered powerless by men or by love. For instance, her relationship with Forge during her time in the X-Men: he literally makes a gun that "neutralize[s]" her powers (x-men wiki 1) and then nurses her back to health, after which they develop a romantic relationship. The idea that Storm needs to be saved by a man is very reminiscent of Monica Lynne's introduction into the comics, where she is saved by T'Challa... over and over and over again.

In my opinion, the fact that Lynne wasn't even in the final *Black Panther* movie really speaks to her overall importance in the comics. In fact, from her introduction in 1970 until her death in 2018 – which, mind you, took place a looooong time after her and T'Challa broke off their engagement for unknown reasons – she was only in 76 comics out of hundreds of issues (Symlen 1).



SHURI



RAMONDA

You may say "alright, so what? What does it matter that one female character wasn't featured in the movie?" Well, her presence in the comics ALSO influences how other black, female characters are viewed.

Pictured are some of the characters I'd like to explore in comparison with Lynne:



STORM

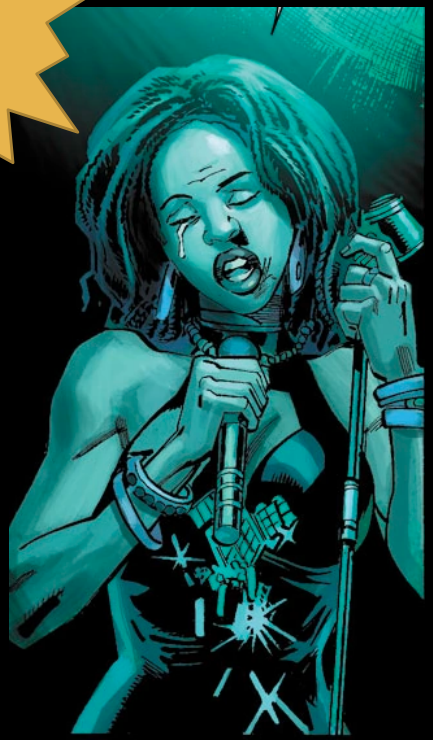
T'CHALLA





SHURI:
-T'Challa's sister
-Eventually becomes the Black Panther/takes over from T'Challa
-Incredibly intelligent scientist
-Total badass
-Doesn't need saving

VS



MONICA:
-T'Challa's lover (until she's replaced for no given reason)
-Is not a superhero/is a civilian
-Singer/sex symbol
-Constantly saved by T'Challa

MONICA

Digging through issues of *Black Panther* comics looking for panels where Monica isn't either naked/scantily dressed, singing in a provocative way, or being saved or seduced by T'Challa is practically impossible. The very purpose of her character in itself is to serve T'Challa's growth as a hero, and when she is no longer needed for that purpose, their engagement is broken off and her character is forgotten for a while, until she's brought back in a 2018 issue where she is killed off, most likely in order to answer why she isn't featured in the movie. Even the creative team for the movie can't collectively recall her name for interviews regarding the choice not to include her. Monica is a civilian, a singer, and often makes comments about "her place" when she is interviewed for television or asked about anything other than singing. This reinforces the idea that unless you have superpowers, your "place" as a woman is a sex item, and anything else is not appropriate for you to even think to have an opinion on (Teutsch 1).

FANS SAY:

"Beyonce w/o the money, fame, or career... because that's what she would've had if she was white. Lois Lane being the world's greatest reporter, Mary Jane Watson becoming a world famous model. Recognized throughout all the comics" (Mortal Man 1)

"T'Challa should have married her... a chance to highlight the difference between 'black' and 'Wakandan'... she would have a role of 'humanizing' [T'Challa]" (MindofShadow 1)



STORM



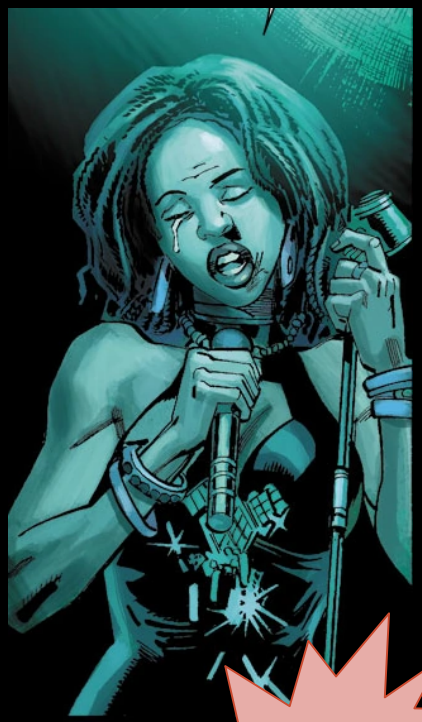
Storm is considered a mutant. Unlike Monica Lynne, she meets T'Challa when she rescues him using her ability to manipulate weather (Fandom.com 1).

Storm is a member of the X-Men, a group of powerful mutant heroes. Formerly referred to as a goddess, Storm eventually embraced her mutant identity and becoming "a capable leader" within the X-Men. She was married to T'Challa, but left on a mission and returned to find that he had annulled their marriage without her knowledge.

FANS SAY:

"[Storm is] one who has kind of suffered from how she's been written in recent years, was drawn out of the X-Men line and was in some ways a victim of her own success" (sw04ca 1)





MONICA:
-Civilian singer
-Influencer (singer) in pop culture, but does not use this for political influence
-T'Challa's lover
-Is used by villains to get to T'Challa in several cases

VS

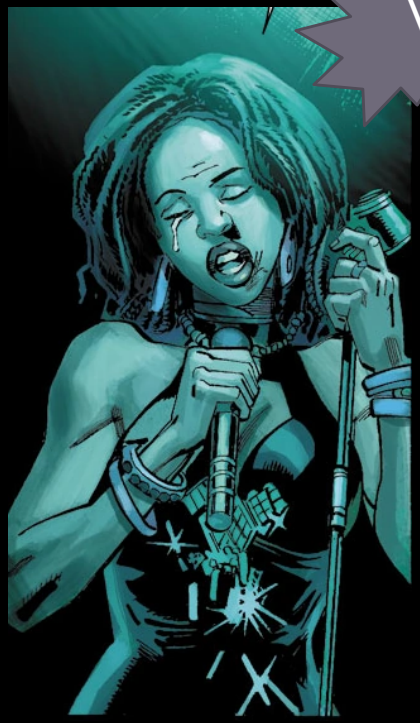
RAMONDA:
-Queen of Wakanda
-Holds position of political power
-T'Challa's mother
-Is used as a pawn by villains to get to T'Challa in several cases



T'CHALLA:
-Superhero with cool powers
-King of Wakanda
-Is never used as bait to lure his superhero lover into a trap
-Political influence and superpowers
-Super intelligent
-Leadership skills, well-spoken, powerful



VS



MONICA:
-Civilian with social influence
-Singer
-Is consistently used as bait to lure her superhero lover into traps
-Social influence
-Intelligence is overshadowed by sex appeal
-Eh, debatable, but well-spoken in interviews

T'CHALLA

T'Challa not only fights racism through his part in both the *Black Panther* comics and the movie; he also fights toxic masculinity, openly weeping in scenes and expressing respect for female characters (Chitwood 1).



In both the movie and the original comics, he serves as the protagonist and title character. His storyline is featured. Even in the comics featuring Shuri, the plotlines center around him.



FANS SAY:

"T'Challa… is all about collaboration. He's a king looking out for Wakanda's best interests, and that means listening to his people, heeding their advice, and asking for help" (Chitwood 2)

RAMONDA



Although Ramonda is, like Monica, used sometimes as a tool by "bad guys" to bait T'Challa, she also has political sway and is hugely influential in the lives of both T'Challa and Shuri. She is considered a "matriarchal figure" (Waldron 1) in Wakanda, both for her children and for the nation at large.

FANS SAY:

Ramonda is not T'Challa's birth mother, but she is Shuri's birthmother, and becomes a mother figure to T'Challa.

"Birthmother of Queen Shuri, Queen Mother Ramonda is the stoic, moral center of the Wakandan royal family. Through her, both Shuri and T'Challa find comfort, council, and matriarchal guidance. Ramonda's wisdom has carried Shuri and T'Challa through hardships like the uprising of the People after a terrorist attack on Wakanda" (Waldron 1)



STORM:
-Supernatural being with wicked powers
-Engaged to/eventually marries T'Challa
-Relationship with T'Challa doesn't end up working
-Can save herself
-Featured in multiple comics/has her own storyline independent of male love interest



VS



MONICA:
-Civilian singer
-Engaged to T'Challa
-Relationship with T'Challa doesn't end up working
-Constantly needs to be rescued
-Hard to find any comics with just her in the frame/no real independent storyline apart from T'Challa's

Great. Cool.
What does this have to do with these other characters?

QUESTION

Well, I sure am glad you asked, because it actually has EVERYTHING to do with these other characters.



When Monica Lynne was first introduced into the Marvel Universe in 1970, she was setting a precedent. Just as T'Challa was Marvel's first well known black superhero, Lynne would likely be a first (or one of the first at least) for black female characters in general. Her character is creating a mold for other black female characters who will follow her; with her creation, she determines how other black female characters will be written, and how much agency and freedom to exist as realistic human characters they are allowed to have.

SHURI



Shuri is a character who is allowed to exist as a full human, which is rare for a female comic book character, especially a black woman. She is multi-faceted: intelligent, sarcastic, strong, opinionated, and is shown in multiple comic issues refusing the help of male romantic interests, directly combatting the femme fatale narrative.

FANS SAY:



"Marvel's most promising character in ages" (Framke 1)

"Shuri is a genius, a leader, and designated by the Ancestors as the vessel of Wakandan history. Shuri can easily sustain her own series" (Schultz 1)