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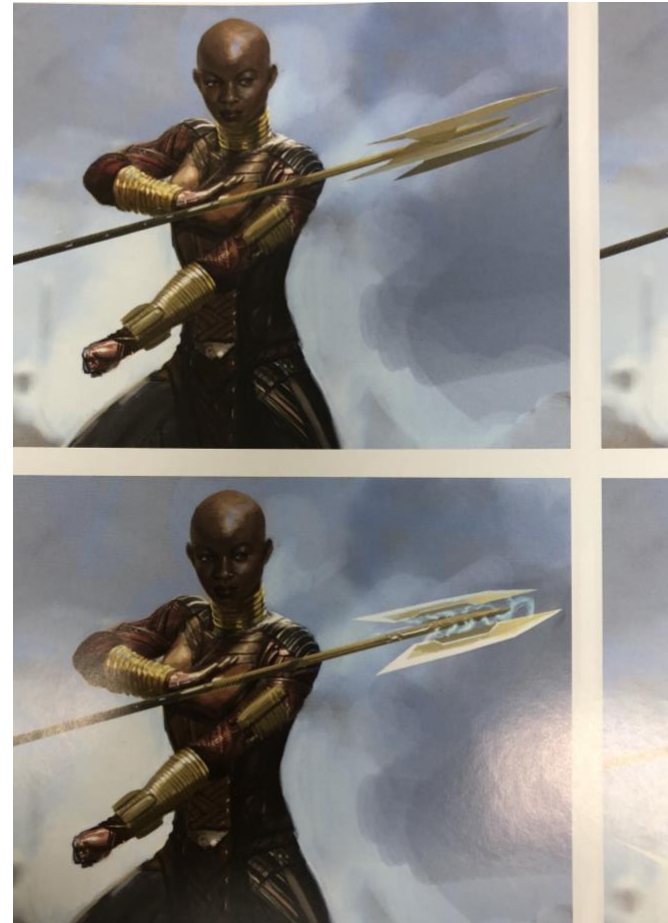
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#ENG342
#BlkComics

Race and Representation

An Analyzation of Black Women in Comics



Olivia Czajka

Editorial Statement

The mission of this zine is to analyze race and representation in comics. From the viewpoint of a white, American, female who is going into education; I am on a mission to figure out the role that black women play in various comics.

Starting with Ayo from the *Black Panther* series, I took into consideration the historical role that she plays in Wakanda compared to her expectations now. I also analyze how comics and their tandem feature films may not link up and portray the characters in the same way as they were intended to be in the comics.

Black woman were not always given the outlets to be powerful and strong in the eyes of society, but as time goes on, it seems that writers in the United States are giving them a chance to shine.

Thank you for taking the time to inform yourself on black women in comics through my own personal lens.

Teach children that all of their identities are important. Teach children that they matter even if society says they are not normal.



It is our job as the future of America, quite frankly the now of America, to make sure that all people are treated justly and fairly. To make sure that the future Americans see themselves in literature and art because they are a part of what makes this country great.

In Conclusion

. . .

In the United States there is much work to do in terms of how race and representation can be improved in literature. Comics, in general, give **women of color** the outlet to be **powerful** influencers - even though they can have flaws. Examples of these flaws include the originally wifely roles that the Dora Milaje were to take on in Wakanda or Monica Rambeau's introduction to The Avengers.

Through trial and error, though, comes eventual success. Intersectionality never makes things easy, but giving **positive representation of black women** in literature makes for a whole new wave of inclusivity in the United States.

Ayo and Aneka, thanks to writers Ta-Nehisi Coates, Roxane Gay, and Yona Harvey, provided a gateway for the **LGBTQ+** agenda to be more normalized.

Storm and Monica Rambeau, both from Marvel comics, were some of the first powerful influences to give black women a good name in comics. Despite being written in times where racism was more present than it is in 2019, though it is not at all dissipated yet, the writers knew how important **race and representation** would be for their comics.

The readers and the general public needed to see black women as being **influential** and **strong**. They needed to be normalized as heroes in the United States.

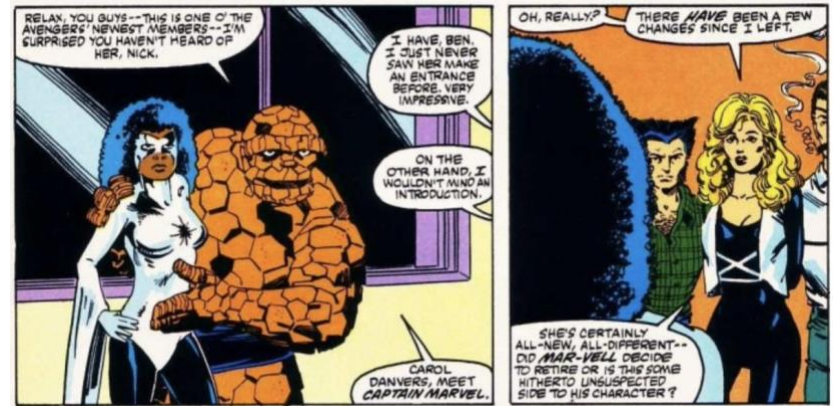
Questions to Consider:

- What prompted the creators to put strong female characters into *Black Panther* starting in the late 1990s?
- What is the role of women in Wakanda? Other fictional nations?
- What does having strong women in comics say about society's growth (both inside and outside of the *Black Panther* comic)?
- What other forms of representation are present in comics?
- How does intersectionality affect comics?
- Why is it important for educators to use diverse texts?

Name: Ayo

Created: November 1998 by Christopher Priest and Mark Texeira

Motivation for Creation: Ayo (and her sister characters) were created as a team of powerful military women that are supposed to act as special forces to Wakanda (a fictional nation) and its king on a team called the Dora Milaje. Ayo is a force that is consistently at the side of the king, T'Challa, to aid and protect him against the evil forces that come to Wakanda.



In the scene above, Monica Rambeau is being introduced to The Avengers team. This appearance was made in *Amazing Spider-Man Annual #16*, October of 1982 (Braly, 2019). While she is shown as a new **powerful** hero of color, the character's reactions to her entrance seems sub-par. The woman named Carol with blonde hair makes a seemingly snide comment about how there have been changes since she was gone.

While this may seem innocent, even her entrance into the series seems a little cold. This, though, is generally representative of how those in the United States feel when people of color, especially **women**, are added into storylines.

Many people support the master narrative, but as noted before, this is dangerous to society because it does not give everyone a chance to see themselves **positively** portrayed.

Why is it important for educators to use diverse texts?

In literature, art, and general society; it is important for people to see representations of themselves in a **positive framework**. Only ever reading the master narrative or seeing people that look or act like you portrayed negatively makes it near impossible to feel normal.

From the standpoint of a future educator, including **diverse** texts in a classroom means understanding that the students deserve to see themselves represented in a positive light.

Not all students look the same, not all teachers look like their students. It is important to have **pride** in one's experiences and not have to wonder why they are left out of the story. They should not have to wonder if people like them deserve to be written into history.

Black comics, specifically *Black Panther* and others such as *Fantastic Four*, are tools that could be placed in a classroom so that students can see **powerful** examples of **strong, black, women**.

Ayo's Impact: Ayo has had ups and downs throughout the *Black Panther* comics, but ultimately she shows strength. She is not one of the main characters in the *Black Panther* series, but when her (and often her Dora Milaje team, too) show up, she seems like ninjas for the king. She shows strength, loyalty, agility, passion, and rebellion. Her presence is aimed to give a consistent feel of **protection** and **strength** among the Wakandan king and people. Ayo also is a light for **LGBTQ+** representation within Wakanda. In her rebellion, she moves swiftly for acts of love for the greater good.



Other Characters to Consider

- Aneka
 - From *Black Panther*
 - Former leader of Dora Milaje
 - Ayo's lover
 - Arrested for killing a chieftain of the village
- Okoye
 - From *Black Panther*
 - Former member of Dora Milaje
 - Speaks to the king only in native language
 - More of a private character
- Monica Rambeau
 - Spectrum from Marvel Comics
 - Superhero with super speed and energy absorption powers
 - Significant member of The Avengers
- Storm
 - From Marvel Comics
 - Mutant formed abilities
 - First major female character of African descent in comics

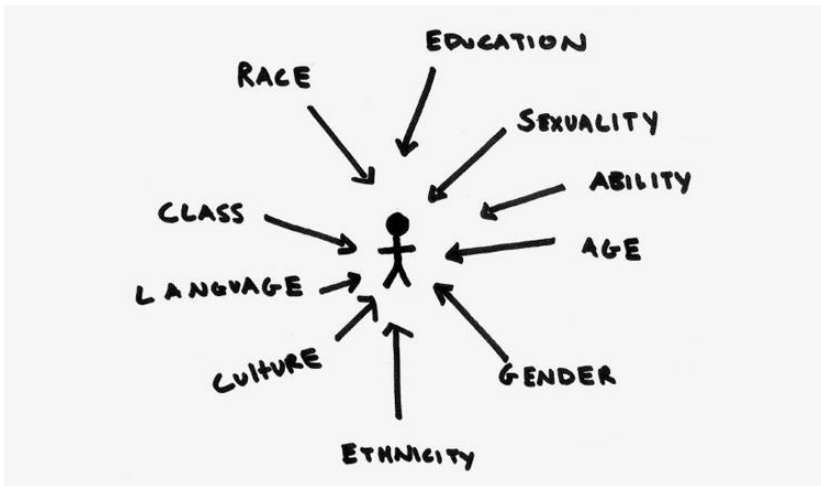
Interestingly enough, although Ayo and Aneka's love flourishes in the *Black Panther* comic, Marvel excluded their relationship from the major motion picture that came out in 2018.



While there is no specific reasoning for this, the lovers play an important role in a civil uprising when Wakanda is close to a societal collapse (Pulliam-Moore, 2018). If they play a large role in the comics; what is the point of stripping the characters of their sexualities in the film? **Intersectionality** plays a large role for these super warriors of Wakanda and it is important to know how representation affects the general public.

How does intersectionality affect comics?

Intersectionality, if unfamiliar with the term, essentially is the overlapping of two or more identities that cause the person with them to experience varying forms of discrimination from society.



In comics, the master narrative does not include many women, especially those of color. That is a prime example of how intersectionality affects people such as black women. The traits or identities that people are born with make them more prone to negativity from the **dominant** people of society.

Name: Aneka

Created: November 1998 by Christopher Priest and Mark Texeira

Motivation: Aneka and her sister character were created as members of the Dora Milaje. The team's goal is to protect King T'Challa of Wakanda. Aneka is special specifically in relation to Ayo because they are lovers. She not only represents a warrior, but also advocates for the LGBTQ+ community.



Name: Okoye

Created: November 1998 by Christopher Priest and Mark Texeira

Motivation: Okoye and her sister character were created as members of the Dora Milaje. The team's goal is to protect King T'Challa of Wakanda. Okoye is a highly skilled warrior who has talents with weaponry and militia strategies.



It was not until 2016 that **LGBTQ+** themes came about in *Black Panther*, but it did take new writers for this to come about. This begs the question of whether or not the original writers had this theme in mind for the nation of Wakanda. However, with time comes **growth** and new ideals.



Ayo and Aneka found their new love coincidentally a year after gay marriage was legalized in the United States (2015). The authors gave Ayo and Aneka their story with a rebellion from the rest of the nation. This did not come about through the nation disowning them, but instead they found **strength** in one another when all other things seemed to fall apart.

Drawing specifically to representation in the *Black Panther* comics, not only does the reader see a change in who is represented, but also feelings and sexualities that are represented.

While the **LGBTQ+ community** also struggles to be framed in society and the media as something normalized or positive; the writers of *Black Panther* put a new kind of relationship into their comics.



The relationship between Ayo and Aneka is **homosexual**. They are not just friends, but lovers. While the characters of the Dora Milaje (which includes both Ayo and Aneka) were introduced into the comic series in the late 1990s, their romantic relationship came about in 2016. The writers that made this relationship possible, as well, changed from black males to black females. Ta-Nehisi Coates, Roxane Gay, and Yona Harvey published the relationship on Nov. 9, 2016.

Name: Monica Rambeau

Created: October 1982 by Roger Stern and John Romita Jr.

Motivation: Monica Rambeau was created as a superhero character for the Marvel comics. Some of her abilities that she later brings to groups such as The Avengers include: energy absorption and travelling at the speed of light. She originally came to The Avengers crew seeking to better her powers. Her prominent role as a leading and considerably valuable superhero put her in a positive light (especially for the black and female communities).



Name: Storm

Created: May 1975 by Len Wein and Dave Cockrum

Motivation: Storm was created as the first major female character of color. She was given the role of a superhero mutant to help protect the fictional world in which she lives. Wein wanted to make a female character of color during the midst of the Bronze Age of comics. She is married to Black Panther which also was a prominent relationship in the comic world.



What does having strong women in comics say about society's growth (both inside and outside of the *Black Panther* comic)?

Putting strong women of color in comics helps prove to society that **black women** are **worthy** of being shown in a positive light. It gives different races, specifically African Americans, the chance to see people that look like themselves in the things that they read. They get to see reflections of their people's **strength** and **capability** in literature that is distributed on a global scale.

What is interesting about "society" is that the people who claim that their voices are more important than other's are the ones who criticize the most. For a country that is called "The Land of the Free", the United States has persisting troubles with racism.

While society may have put a negative frame around what it means to be black in the United States; the more that race is represented in a **positive** setting throughout literature and media (such as comics and their tandem movies), the more normalized it will be to appreciate and **celebrate** black culture.

So why were powerful, black, superhero women like Storm on the rise in the mid 1970s while at the same time women of color were represented as side characters with aggressive tendencies? While there is no exact answer, authors such as Roger Stern and Len Wein were some of the motivators that incorporated a positive image of women of color.



This may have led to more authors wanting to cater to **diverse** audiences, include **diverse** characters in a meaningful way, and make a change for **representation** of women of color.

Both in realistic settings and fictional worlds increasingly started to change the way their black female characters looked and acted.

What prompted the creators to put strong female characters into *Black Panther* starting in the late 1990s?

When the Dora Milaje (female warrior group of Wakanda) was introduced to *Black Panther* in 1998, the women's roles were not as they are now just over 20 years later. Priest first imagined the Dora Milaje as "wives-in-training" (Broadnax, 2018). However, as their popularity started to rise, their roles went from **lovesick wives to powerful warriors** who protect king T'Challa.

The creators of *Black Panther* seek out representation for their readers so that everyone gets the chance to see people that look and act like them have **strength, power, and responsibility**.

On their rise to a new name, two members of the Dora Milaje develop a love interest that jumps out of the typical master narrative. Ayo and Aneka have a love that begins to deepen starting in 2016. Their love story is especially unprecedented because of the **intersectionality** not typically shown in media. This was a big deal for the LGBTQ+ community as the love interest is added to *Black Panther* without making a fuss which gives readers a sense of normality.

What is the role of women in Wakanda?
Other fictional nations?

The women of Wakanda, as previously mentioned, were not created to just be warriors. They took on more of a romantic and wifely roles back in the 1990s. However, they were not the only women of color in the comic scene. Storm, created in the spring of 1975, was created by Len Wein and Dave Cockrum as the first female character of color in comics. She also has ties to the Wakandan king, T'Challa, because they were married in *Black Panther* Volume 4: #14 and #15 (2006).



They quickly became one of the most powerful couples in the Marvel comics in terms of their powers and influence. They were married for six years but broke it off after battling on opposing sides with The Avengers versus the X-Men.

Women, especially those of color, were not typically portrayed as powerful or given roles of importance. Going back to the 1970s, characters such as "Black Maria" portrayed black women as angry, aggressive, and having no class. The **negative portrayal** did not only represent the stereotypes of black women in comics, but rather any form of media.



When women started to take on more prominent roles as superheroes and warriors who protect a nation, the representation slowly started to shine a positive light on black women. This is not to say that even 50 years later in 2019 that stereotypes are no longer, but the **positive influence and role models** that were put into comics helped advocate for the fair treatment and portrayal of women of color.