The Black Panther from a different perspective

The Black Panther is a superhero created by Marvel in 1966. You might remember from the video lecture on *Blazing Saddles* that the first comic book to feature a heroic black man, Lobo, came out in 1965 and stopped publication almost immediately because stores refused to carry the books. Marvel did not introduce the Black Panther as a stand-alone hero at first. Instead, he was a supporting character in storylines featuring the Fantastic Four and the Avengers. It wasn’t until 1973 that the Black Panther received the starring role in his own comic series. While it is perfectly possible to read and respond to the Black Panther as any other superhero, with similar concerns, flaws, and struggles, it is hard to divorce his role in the world of comics from the history of racism and civil rights in America and in the world. That is the aspect I’ll be discussing here.

Marvel invented the character of the Black Panther and his kingdom, Wakanda, but they were drawing on fantasies that dated back centuries, and really took hold in the nineteenth century. Fantasies of a hidden, sometimes technologically-advanced African kingdom appeared in numerous books at the end of the nineteenth century, most famously in *She, King Solomon’s Mines*, and *Allan Quartermain* by the white British author H. Rider Haggard. This plot was also picked up by African American novelists, like Pauline Hopkins in *Of One Blood* and Sutton Griggs in *Unfettered*. So, when Marvel invented Wakanda, a technologically-advanced, hidden, highly secretive African nation, they were reproducing myths about Africa that already existed. There are many reasons why this myth came into being, but I won’t get into them here. The short version is that this myth represented a white European and American fascination with Africa’s vast resources and territory, as well as the “challenge” it presented to foreigners who traveled there.

This myth is tied directly to the actual economic and political exploitation of Africa through imperialism, particularly in the 19th and 20th centuries. That history is an important underpinning of the Black Panther storylines in general, but it is especially important to the miniseries that you are watching today. The miniseries engages directly with this history of oppression and its aftermath.

To get some background on that history, I’d like you to watch some video clips.

1) Imperialism: Crash Course World History #35: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aJaltUmrgo, from the timestamp 3:20 until the end. The concept of Business Imperialism that is introduced at the end of this clip is especially relevant to the Black Panther miniseries, as are the comments on the role of technology, which relate to Klaw’s 19th century flashback in the miniseries. The fact that Klaw’s attempted take-over of Wakanda is funded by the Belgians ties back to Belgium’s particularly horrific history in Africa (you can read more about it here if you are interested: http://www.historytoday.com/tim-stanley/belgiums-heart-darkness).

2) Decolonization and Nationalism Triumphant: Crash Course World History #40: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T_sGTspaF4Y, from the timestamp 9:20 until the end. The whole video is good, but this is the segment that focuses on Africa. Decolonization and its effects are related to the country neighboring Wakanda and American policy there.
3) Playwright and activist Wole Soyinka on Africa since 1960 (the whole thing: about 4 minutes): https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HWjxjPQwBX0&feature=related. This video clip shows Henry Louis Gates Jr. talking to Soyinka about the state of Africa after the end of colonization. Soyinka’s observations about the lingering impact of colonial rule on Nigeria sheds light on the geopolitical issues that underwrite the Black Panther miniseries.

As those clips showed, European countries colonized Africa for economic reasons, but their colonization and subsequent oppression of African peoples had devastating consequences for their economies, political systems, and cultures. The videos did not address the role religion played in colonization, but it was important. Religious missions were one way that Europeans spread their version of culture and suppressed, to greater or lesser degrees, African cultures and beliefs. In some cases missionaries tried to mitigate the horrors of colonialism (which could include brutal torture and slave-like labor), but in other cases they contributed to the misery. The flying knight character in the Black Panther miniseries is drawing on that history of religious conquest, as well as older language.

Although America never directly colonized any African territory, America has had economic interests in Africa, especially during the 20th century. As with other countries, these interests are primarily economic (Africa’s natural resources) and political as a means to maintain access to those resources.

Now that you have a sense of the history of African colonization by white Western nations, lets get back to the comic. Marvel traditionally did not engage in the economic and political history of Africa in Black Panther storylines. The earliest Black Panther comics either had him facing exotic villains inside his home country of Wakanda, which is isolated from the rest of Africa and its concerns, or had him living and fighting villains in America, sometimes in the context of the civil rights movement.

*Ultimate Avengers 2: The Rise of the Panther* tells one version of the Panther’s engagement with the U.S. Avengers team and – by extension – the U.S. government. The movie includes Wakanda’s resistance to outsiders as part of the plot, but does not really explain why Wakanda is that way, aside from wanting to keep their vibranium a secret. In this movie, the Panther reaches out to the Avengers via Captain America for help because he knows Captain America has experience with Kleiser. In this storyline, Americans and Wakandans end up collaborating to fight an extra-terrestrial enemy. Aliens, as you might notice, are useful enemies because fighting them can unite multiple countries together: if the aliens are beaten, everyone benefits. However, the Black Panther TV series takes a different approach, one that overtly recognizes the complicated historical relationship between America and African countries.

*Black Panther*, the TV series based on the Marvel Knights storyline, was finished production by 2010 and first aired in America in 2011. This version, written and developed by African American producer, director, and writer Reginald Hudlin, engages much more directly with the history and politics underpinning the “hidden kingdom” legend Wakanda was based on, and the colonialism and racism that inspired it. Hudlin’s Panther does not face an alien invasion: he faces a mercenary invasion funded by a European government, supported by a corrupt African dictator, and complicated by the concerned “intervention” of the United States. In many ways the series crosses the line between hero story and satire (just as *Blazing Saddles* did, but this one isn’t designed as a comedy). The political satire is obvious
from the beginning of episode 1, when “Dondi Reese” (a thinly-veiled version of Condoleezza Rice) makes a case for forcing American intervention into Wakanda using ethically questionable means. While many superhero stories are indirectly about the issues and concerns of the society that produced them, this series is directly and explicitly about those concerns – from a non-majority point of view.