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### **Citation**

El Morabet Belhaj, R. (2024). Taking on the Black Trauma of Vietnam: Spike Lee and Da 5 Bloods. *Leiden Elective Academic Periodical*, (4), 11-24. Retrieved from <https://hdl.handle.net/1887/3764623>

Version: Publisher's Version

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**Note:** To cite this publication please use the final published version (if applicable).

## **Taking on the Black Trauma of Vietnam: Spike Lee and *Da 5 Bloods***

Rajae el Morabet Belhaj

*We fought an immoral war that wasn't ours  
for rights we didn't have.*

Paul, *Da 5 Bloods* (2020)

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**T**he majority of Vietnam War films produced by Hollywood since the late 1960s have centered largely on depicting the perspectives and encounters of American soldiers in Southeast Asia.<sup>1</sup> The Vietnam War was a significant period in American history, especially for Black soldiers. Black soldiers were more likely to be drafted into the war, as they were disproportionately represented in the lower-income bracket. This was due to the fact that poverty and race were closely intertwined, and for many Black Americans, joining the army was often seen as the only way to escape poverty. However, even in the army, they faced discrimination and prejudice, both from their fellow soldiers and the locals in Vietnam. Despite their significant contributions and sacrifices, the stories of Black veterans have been largely overlooked in Hollywood's mainstream narrative of the Vietnam War, either through stereotypical depictions or a lack of representation. The mainstream narrative in Hollywood tends to focus more on the experiences of white soldiers, such as in *Platoon* (1986), *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), and *We Were Soldiers* (2002).

This article offers a comprehensive analysis of Spike Lee's *Da 5 Bloods* (2020), a narrative film that explores the experiences of Black soldiers and veterans during and after the Vietnam War. This movie stands out as a significant contribution to the genre of 'Vietnam War films,' as it sheds light on the neglected aspect of the

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<sup>1</sup> Woodman, "Represented in the Margins," 38.

Black soldiers' experiences. The story follows Paul (Delroy Lindo), Otis (Clarke Peters), Eddie (Norman Lewis), and Melvin (Isiah Whitlock Jr.), four Vietnam War veterans who return to contemporary Vietnam in search of the remains of their fallen squad leader, "Stormin'" Norman (Chadwick Boseman) and a locker of gold bars they left behind in the jungle. While the film is set in present-day Vietnam, flashback sequences effectively transport the audience back to the horrors of the war, contextualizing the experiences that formed these men.<sup>2</sup>

Since Lee's film was released only recently and under suboptimal circumstances, it has received limited scholarly attention. *Da 5 Bloods* was released in the summer of 2020, at a time when COVID-19 restrictions prevented it from receiving an official premiere, despite having been selected to premiere at the 2020 Cannes Film Festival. As a result, the film's theatrical release was canceled, and it was exclusively distributed on the streaming platform Netflix.<sup>3</sup> These circumstances may have contributed to the film's limited scholarly attention, as scholars may have had fewer opportunities to view and analyze the film in a traditional theatrical setting.

Brian J. Woodman has investigated how Vietnam War films misrepresent or stereotype African Americans in five films: *The Green Berets* (1968), *The Boyz In Company C* (1978), *Apocalypse Now* (1979), *Platoon* (1986), and *Hamburger Hill* (1987). Woodman contends that while these films may not accurately portray African American combat soldiers, they still shape worldviews.<sup>4</sup> Building on Woodman's research, this article focuses on the depiction of Black soldiers and veterans, through the lens of 'trauma' and 'memory,' following Maurice Halbwachs' definition of both concepts. Collective memory, as a group's shared understanding of the past shaped by experiences, values, and beliefs, is dynamic and evolving. Traumatic events can challenge established narratives, affecting collective memory.<sup>5</sup> Thus, films like *Da 5*

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> Brown, "Spike Lee's Forever War."

<sup>4</sup> Woodman, "Represented in the Margins," 38-39.

<sup>5</sup> Halbwachs, *On Collective Memory*, 21-28.

*Bloods* illuminate the complexities of collective memory in marginalized communities and their experiences of trauma and remembrance.

In keeping with the general theme of this special issue, this article argues that *Da 5 Bloods* matters as a cultural object because it illuminates neglected history that remains relevant today. Released in 2020, during a period marked by protests after the killing of George Floyd and heightened political tensions under the administration of Donald Trump, the film sheds light on racial injustice and the lasting impacts of the Vietnam War on Black veterans. Furthermore, *Da 5 Bloods* holds significance in relation to the themes of trauma and memory by portraying the enduring psychological and emotional wounds carried by Black veterans of the Vietnam War. The film delves into the complexities of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) and the challenges of processing and remembering past traumatic experiences, highlighting how these issues continue to affect individuals long after the war has ended. By addressing these themes, *Da 5 Bloods* underscores the importance of acknowledging and confronting trauma, while also exploring the power and limitations of memory in shaping personal and collective identities.

This article, situated at the intersection of trauma, memory, and film studies, critically examines representations of Black soldiers in Hollywood films through the lens of *Da 5 Bloods*. While acknowledging the film's historical context, the analysis primarily adopts a film studies approach, exploring the representations themselves rather than their historical accuracy. In other words, the film uses history insofar as it can be helpful to create a narrative framework. In this article, I will argue that *Da 5 Bloods* portrays the enduring effects of trauma and memory on the lives of Black Vietnam War veterans, highlighting the complex interplay between individual and collective experiences, the psychological and physical toll of war, and the ongoing struggle for racial justice and reconciliation. This essay incorporates insights from studying relevant academic literature on the intersection of race, masculinity, and memory; furthermore, it conducts a close reading of the film by studying paratexts.

### **Stormin' Norman and Hanoi Hannah**

In *Da 5 Bloods*, the characters of Stormin' Norman and Hanoi Hannah play important roles in representing the themes of trauma and memory. These two characters serve as mirrors to one another, reflecting the deep wounds of the Vietnam War and its lasting impact on those who experienced it. Stormin' Norman, played by Chadwick Boseman, is a central figure in the film, both in the past as a leader of the Bloods during the war and in the present as a memory and a guiding force for the surviving members of the group.

Throughout the film, Norman is portrayed as a charismatic and fearless leader, revered by his fellow soldiers for his bravery and ideals. Portrayed through flashback sequences, he is particularly central to the exploration of trauma and memory in the film. As the squad leader and a figure of inspiration for the Bloods, Norman appears in flashbacks as a symbol of courage, integrity, and idealism. This becomes clear from a flashback that shows the Bloods discussing what to do with the stash of gold they recover from the crash site of a Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) airplane. This gold was intended to be used as payment for the Lahu people for their assistance in fighting the Viet Cong. Gold plays an important role in the film. After some back-and-forth, it is Stormin' Norman who suggests that they keep the gold for themselves:

NORMAN: We bury it. For now. They ask, we say the [Viet Cong] got it. Then we come back and collect.

PAUL: Steal it?

NORMAN: We ain't stealin' Shit! WE were the very First People to die for this Red, White and Blue. It was a Soul Brother, Crispus Attucks at The Muthafuckin' Boston Massacre. We been dying for this Country from the very Get-Go, hoping someday they'd they give us our rightful place but all we got was a Foot up our Black Asses. No Mule, No Forty Acres, No nothing! Fuck dat! The USA owe us! We built this Bitch!

OTIS: What you sayin'?

NORMAN: We abscond this Gold for every single Black Boot that never made it back home. For all the Brothers and Sistas that were Stolen From Mother Africa to Jamestown, Virginia way back in 1619. We give this Gold to our People not us.<sup>6</sup>

This scene demonstrates that Norman shows courage: he is willing to defy authority and take action that he believes is right, even if it means facing consequences. At the same time, Norman shows integrity by insisting that they are not 'stealing' the gold but rather reclaiming it as reparations for the injustices suffered by African Americans throughout history. He believes that the United States owes them this compensation for their sacrifices and contributions to the country. In the broader context of the film, the viewer may conclude that with 'them,' Norman refers to African Americans in general. Lastly, Norman's vision of a more just and equitable society is evident in his statement that the gold should be used to benefit 'our people' rather than for personal gain, which demonstrates his idealism. He believes that justice and equality are worth fighting for, even if the struggle requires sacrifices. The gold itself becomes a symbol of the value and worthiness of African Americans. Norman sees it as a tangible representation of the sacrifices they have made and the contributions they have made to the nation. By reclaiming the gold, he is symbolically asserting African Americans' right to dignity and equality. The flashbacks featuring Norman highlight his charismatic leadership and the impact he had on the Bloods, as well as the lasting influence of his memory on their lives.

In contrast, Hanoi Hannah, played by Veronica Ngo, represents a different kind of trauma and memory. As a propaganda broadcaster for the North Vietnamese government during the war, Hannah served as a tool of psychological warfare, broadcasting

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<sup>6</sup> Lee, *Da 5 Bloods*. All quotes from *Da 5 Bloods* as in the original screenplay, available here: <https://deadline.com/wp-content/uploads/2020/12/DA-5-BLOODS-Script.pdf>.

messages intended to demoralize American troops and sow discord within their ranks.<sup>7</sup> Hannah repeatedly addresses Black soldiers during the flashbacks to the war. While her role may seem minor in the grand scheme of the film, the audience gains insight into the efforts of the Vietnamese to incite rebellion and dissent among African American soldiers, which is further emphasized in the broadcast announcing the tragic passing of civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.<sup>8</sup>

Hannah's character is complex and multifaceted, challenging the audience to consider the impact of war on all those involved, not just the American soldiers on the front lines. As a seductive figure, Hannah uses her voice as a weapon, manipulating and undermining the morale of opposing forces. Her role in the film highlights the impact of propaganda and the power of words in shaping perceptions and opinions, as the example below demonstrates:

HANOI HANNAH: Black G.I., In Memphis, Tennessee, a White Man Assassinated Dr. Martin Luther King who heroically opposed the cruel racial discrimination in the USA. Dr. King also opposed the US War in Vietnam.

HANOI HANNAH: Your Government sent 600,000 Troops to crush the Rebellion. Your Soul Sisters and Soul Brothers are enraged in over 122 Cities. They kill them while you fight against us so far away from where you are needed.

HANOI HANNAH: The South Vietnamese People are resolute against these Fascist acts against Negroes who struggle for Civil Rights and Freedom. Negroes are only 11 percent of the US Population but among Troops here in Vietnam you are 32 percent. Is it fair you serve more than the White Americans that sent you here!

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<sup>7</sup> Whittaker, "Psychological Warfare in Vietnam," 171-177.

<sup>8</sup> Ó Briain, "Songs of the Golden Age," 73-74.

**HANOI HANNAH:** Nothing is more confused than to be ordered into a War to DIE or to be MAIMED for Life without the faintest idea of what's going on. I dedicate Brother Marvin Gaye's WHAT'S GOING ON to the Soul Brothers of the 1st Infantry Division. Big Red One, 2nd Battalion 136th Regiment.<sup>9</sup>

This scene shows Hanoi Hannah addressing Black soldiers directly, using their struggles for civil rights and freedom in the United States to sow doubt and resentment towards their own government. Hannah brings up the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and emphasizes the overrepresentation of Black soldiers fighting in Vietnam. Through this portrayal, Lee alludes to the propaganda spread by the Viet Cong. Moreover, Hannah embodies the paradoxes of the war. Despite being the voice of the enemy, she is portrayed as a sympathetic character who is not entirely evil. This scene demonstrates how Hanoi Hannah aims to highlight the unique experiences and challenges faced by Black soldiers within the broader war context.

Both Stormin' Norman and Hanoi Hannah serve as symbols of the ways in which trauma and memory can shape individuals and communities in the aftermath of war. Norman represents the heroism and sacrifice of those who fought in Vietnam, while Hannah represents the psychological toll of war on all those involved. Their characters highlight the complexities of memory and trauma, as they wrestle with the legacy of the war and its impact on their lives.

### **Flashbacks**

As stated above, Norman and Hannah only appear in the film during flashback sequences to the war era. Flashback scenes are a common narrative technique that provides the audience with a glimpse into the characters' past and helps them understand the events that have shaped their lives.<sup>10</sup> *Da 5 Bloods* employs flashbacks

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<sup>9</sup> Lee, *Da 5 Bloods*.

<sup>10</sup> Grainge, "Introduction," 1-2.



to showcase the characters' experiences during the war and to explore the lasting impact of those memories on their present-day lives. One of the primary ways in which the film uses flashbacks is to illustrate the contrast between the past and the present, highlighting a contrast between the idealized memories of youth and the harsh realities of the characters' current situations.

The younger characters in the film's war flashback scenes are played by the same actors, aged in their sixties and seventies, as in the present-day scenes. The decision adds a layer of authenticity to the film and highlights the idea of 'living memories.' This means that the memories and experiences of the characters are still very much alive and relevant in their present lives. By portraying the characters as both their younger and current selves simultaneously, the film blurs the boundaries between the past and present, highlighting how the memories of youth are intertwined with the realities of adulthood. This technique effectively conveys the idea that our past experiences shape who we are in the present and continue to influence us throughout our lives.

By featuring the actors at their present-day ages in the war flashback scenes, without makeup or de-aging effects, Lee is able to show how the characters' current dilemmas color their recollections of their former selves. The flashbacks are not presented as a nostalgic trip down memory lane, but rather as a means for the characters to confront their past and come to terms with the trauma they experienced. This artistic choice adds a layer of authenticity to the story, as the actors are able to draw on their own experiences and emotions to bring their characters to life. It also shows that the Bloods are still deeply affected by their wartime memories, despite reaching middle age.<sup>11</sup> The use of older actors also adds a sense of urgency to the film, as the characters are running out of time to make peace with their past.<sup>12</sup> The use of flashbacks in this way emphasizes the contradiction between memory and reality, as the characters come face-to-face with the differences between their idealized visions of the past and the harsh truths of the present.

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<sup>11</sup> Brown, "Spike Lee's Forever War."

<sup>12</sup> Ugwu, "Spike Lee and the Battlefield of American History."

In addition to this, I would also like to suggest that the use of the same actors in both time frames allows for a smooth transition between the present day and the flashback sequences. This technique contributes to the fluidity and unity of the narrative, as viewers are able to perceive the characters' past and present identities as interconnected. This also allows for a deeper exploration of the characters' psychological states as the audience is able to witness the impact of the war on their lives and how it has shaped them into their present selves.

The flashbacks in *Da 5 Bloods* reveal the trauma and psychological impact of the war on the characters, showing the horrors and brutality of combat, the bonds of brotherhood forged among the Bloods in Vietnam, and the moral complexities of war. These scenes blur the boundaries between past and present, highlighting how memory and trauma are intertwined. As the characters revisit their wartime experiences, the past seeps into the present in a visceral and disorienting manner, as the characters relive their wartime experiences, causing a sense of temporal dislocation that invites the audience to experience the characters' memories and traumas.

### **Combining historical footage and contemporary scenes**

The use of historical footage alongside contemporary scenes in *Da 5 Bloods* is yet another narrative device that Lee employs to effectively communicate trauma and memory. By blending actual footage from the Vietnam War era with fictionalized scenes featuring the characters, the film creates a seamless tapestry of past and present, illustrating the enduring impact of the war on the lives of the Bloods and portraying the complexities of memory and trauma. In *The Spike Lee Brand*, Delphine Letort argues that in Spike Lee's filmmaking, factual and fictional elements are intricately woven together, a style exemplified by the title sequences of his movies, which employ a specific editing technique.<sup>13</sup>

The incorporation of historical footage serves multiple purposes, adding layers of meaning and complexity to the narrative. Firstly, as also argued by Letort, the use of archival footage creates a

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<sup>13</sup> Letort, *The Spike Lee Brand*, 12.

sense of authenticity and realism in the film. The footage anchors the film in the late 1960s, providing a historical background to the narrative.<sup>14</sup> By using real-life footage from the Vietnam War, the film transports the audience back in time to experience the events of the war as if they were there themselves. The film starts with a sequence that cuts from the archival footage to the Bloods arriving at their hotel in Saigon. This helps to immerse the audience in the story and creates a stronger emotional connection to the characters and their experiences.

Moreover, the archival footage acts as a visual representation of the characters' memories and traumas. Through the use of flashbacks and archival footage, we are given insight into the characters' past experiences in the war and how this war continues to haunt them in the present. This adds depth to the characters and helps to humanize them, making their struggles and motivations more relatable to the audience. Another effect of combining historical footage and contemporary scenes in the film is the sense of immediacy it lends to the storytelling. As Letort argues in *The Spike Lee Brand*, Lee uses archival footage to ground the narrative in his documentaries in historical reality.<sup>15</sup> This seems to be the case with most of his fictional films as well. With *Da 5 Bloods*, the archival footage shown at the beginning anchors the film in the late 1960s, providing a historical background to the performance. By interweaving this footage with the fictionalized scenes featuring the Bloods, the film blurs the boundaries between documentary and drama, inviting the audience to witness the war through the eyes of those who lived it.

Furthermore, the juxtaposition of historical footage and contemporary scenes allows the film to explore the ways in which memory shapes our understanding of the past. The use of archival footage helps to contextualize the characters' experiences during the war, providing a visual and historical framework for their memories and traumas. Just as Letort notes how Lee's documentaries merge various modes—including the expository through archival footage—to construct a representation that is simply an illusion of unmediated

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<sup>14</sup> *Id.*, 14.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

access to reality, the use of archival footage in the context of war films like *Da 5 Bloods* serves to ground the characters' experiences in historical fact and visual evidence.<sup>16</sup> This technique helps viewers understand the context and significance of the characters' memories and traumas, creating a more layered representation of their wartime experiences.

The archival footage serves as a form of collective memory, representing the shared history and experiences of the Vietnam War era that continue to shape the lives of the characters. While primarily focusing on Lee's documentary work, Letort contends that—although the witnesses may have moved on—archival footage will always be able to depict scenes of chaos that have not been forgotten.<sup>17</sup> By integrating this footage into the narrative, the film acknowledges the broader social and political context in which the Bloods' experiences unfold, underscoring the larger forces at play during the war and its aftermath. The historical footage shows the extreme violence, chaos, and devastation of the war, grounding the characters' stories in a larger historical framework and highlighting the enduring legacy of the conflict.

The use of historical footage in *Da 5 Bloods* also serves to amplify the emotional impact of the characters' experiences and the trauma they carry with them. The visuals evoke the past and the use of archival footage allows the viewer to imagine the context of the Bloods' past in Vietnam. Although the viewer may have moved on from that past, archival footage depicts scenes of chaos that have not been forgotten.<sup>18</sup> The archival footage captures the raw intensity and horror of war, immersing the audience in the chaos and brutality of the conflict. By juxtaposing this footage with the contemporary scenes featuring the Bloods, the film creates a sense of intergenerational trauma, illustrating the ways in which memories of the past continue to resonate in the present.

The blending of historical footage and contemporary scenes allows the film to explore themes of race, identity, and collective memory, confronting the legacy of racism and injustice that the

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<sup>16</sup> *Id.*, 28.

<sup>17</sup> *Id.*, 35.

<sup>18</sup> *Id.*, 46.

Bloods faced during and after the Vietnam War. The juxtaposition of past and present serves as a reminder of the ongoing struggle for racial equality and social justice in American society. Furthermore, the use of historical footage in the film serves as a powerful depiction, blending the documentary-like realism of archival footage with the stylized and cinematic nature of the contemporary scenes, capturing the complexity and nuance of the characters' experiences and emotions in a rich and textured visual landscape.

### **Conclusion**

This study has been premised on the idea that Hollywood has whitewashed conflict. *Da 5 Bloods* represents an interesting break with this tendency. The reading of Lee's *Da 5 Bloods* through the lens of trauma and memory offered here is intended to provide an opening for a new critical approach to the study of Black trauma in Vietnam War films, with a strong focus on representation. This article has illustrated the portrayal of trauma's impact on Black Vietnam War veterans in *Da 5 Bloods*, emphasizing both individual and collective experiences through various narrative techniques employed by Lee. The incorporation of characters symbolizing the profound influence of trauma and memory on individuals and communities post-war, as well as the unique choice to depict older actors playing their younger selves, underscores the concept of 'living memories' and the enduring effects of past experiences. In addition to this, the use of historical footage within a fictional narrative enriches the film's storytelling, adding layers of depth and complexity. Delphine Letort's research on Spike Lee's documentary approach has informed this study significantly, shedding light on Lee's innovative use of historical footage alongside modern scenes. However, it is evident that further scholarly attention is needed to fully appreciate Lee's groundbreaking fusion of history and fiction in cinematic storytelling. To continue building on this opening, further research could consider other key representations of Black Vietnam War veterans in conventional Vietnam War films.

This study has laid the foundation for further research on the effects of not de-aging actors in flashbacks, particularly in exploring the nuanced impact this creative choice has on storytelling and

viewer engagement. A pressing area for investigation would be the implications of showcasing older actors in flashback sequences to emphasize the authentic representation of aging individuals and their lived experiences. Comparative research could be useful in contrasting this approach with the use of CGI to de-age actors, as in films like *The Irishman* (2019), where technology alters the appearance of actors to depict them in their younger years. This contrast raises intriguing questions about memory construction and the portrayal of character development through visual representation. Additionally, examining how Spike Lee combines documentary footage with fictional scenes in other films such as *Malcolm X* (1992), *Clockers* (1995), and *BlacKkKlansman* (2018) could offer valuable insights into his distinctive storytelling methods and the intersection of reality and fiction in cinematic narratives. A comparative study of these films could reveal the effects and thematic significance of merging documentary elements with fictional storytelling, contributing to a deeper understanding of Lee's directorial style and thematic explorations.

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