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Explaining Vietnam in *Da 5 Bloods* to Globalize Antiracism and Improve Activist Storytelling

Abstract:

This research critiques the misrepresentation of Vietnamese people in the Vietnam War film *Da 5 Bloods* (2020) and deconstructs the filmmaking process leading to it. I will identify and resolve ideological limits in the filmmakers as well as external challenges in production that constitute this false African-American fictionalization of another minority outside the United States. In doing so, I reject a hasty inclusivity that misunderstands different experiences with racial oppression and emphasize the efficiency of a respectful identification with injustice among different minorities worldwide. By advocating for a decentering of the American trajectory of antiracism and refocusing on non-American ones, I also hope to inspire a more critical and less reliant consumption of predominant cultural sources about the Vietnam War within the United States. My outline for a new screenplay that moves away from the flawed racial dynamics in *Da 5 Bloods* will exemplify how the antiracist theme can be globalized with a more responsible narrative voice, informed by more than one perspective.

Background:

After decades, the Vietnam War remains a central subject in mainstream cultural platforms in the United States, including its film industry. Indeed, fiction provides a rich repository for historical experiences to be recounted, reexplored, and renegotiated (Luhssen ix). As stated by novelist Viet Thanh Nguyen, “All wars are fought twice, the first time on the battlefield, the second time in memory.” For both wartime Americans and later generations who rely even more on fiction to tap into the collective memory of their nation’s past, the power of the American war film over American views about the Vietnam chapter grows throughout time. The inevitability of a merge of history and imagination is even more intense for the Vietnam War than that for other wars: David Luhssen draws a contrast between the insignificant amount of fictitious narratives of what he calls “the forgotten war [involving the United States]” in Korea and the continuous reproduction of works about the Vietnam War, one “that has never been forgotten” (ix).

Nonetheless, the ongoing fascination with the war in Vietnam is not a universal phenomenon. The Vietnamese scholar Nguyet Nguyen once expressed her frustration with America's obsession with a war that to her and her native community felt like an event of the past rather than an open wound: No matter where she went during her time as an international student in the United States, she found herself pulled into discussions with Americans that were built on pervasive myths about Vietnam and its people (2-3). Such discrepancy between the American and Vietnamese thoughts illustrates the predominance of the former that obscures less popular opinions like the latter—with or without intention. Even the widely used term “Vietnam War” is not sufficiently reflective of reality. The Vietnamese, for example, speak of an “American War” waged on locals by foreigners; which in turn overlooks the fact that Laotians

and Cambodians fought and suffered tremendous losses too (V. Nguyen). The complicatedness of this conflict is as such that in the realm of filmmaking, it proves almost impossible for any endeavor to reenact it onscreen to pledge an immunity to biased interpretations.

Da 5 Bloods (2020) is one recent American attempt to revisit the Vietnam subject through an antiracist lens. The filmmakers sought to condemn ongoing racism on a larger scale than just within the United States (Newland, King Jr., Willmott): In telling a story about African-American veterans returning to modern-day Vietnam, they linked the American discrimination against Black soldiers to its violence against the Vietnamese. They then recognized that they should not only highlight the largely erased African-American war experience but also “give a human face” to the Vietnamese. Unfortunately, their definition and demonstration of a “human” Vietnamese went in an extreme direction: In the film, postwar Vietnamese people are hostile and bitter towards returning Americans. They are also savage and violent as a direct result of their vulnerability to Western-inflicted trauma. Such depictions reflect an inaccurate, presumptive and/or outdated grasp about the postwar Vietnamese mentality as well as the distinct Vietnamese navigation of American racism. Rather than reflecting a true Vietnamese voice, *Da 5 Bloods* includes one that mainly serves to complicate the character arc of the African-American protagonists and complement their own racialized grievances.

That the film enjoys critical praise in the United States as a revolutionizing presence in a whitewashed body of war films means that its take on the Vietnamese does not strike American viewers as problematic and racialized. The ignorance indicates an Americentric preoccupation with their own race battle, which persists even though the filmmakers explicitly stated their intention for transnational inclusion. Despite this attentiveness to a foreign engagement, what was still preventing the American filmmakers of *Da 5 Bloods* from actually fulfilling this goal?

Methods:

To approach insights firsthand, I plan to conduct two in-depth interviews myself, one with one of the writers and another with a Vietnamese cast or crew member. I contend that a Vietnamese anecdote of their duties and interactions on set can act as an unmediated evaluation of the American creators and their Americanized rendition of Vietnam. I will first look at sources that directly concerns the production of *Da 5 Bloods* to detect both ideological and non-ideological factors that may have prevented a more nuanced apprehension of Vietnamese people. I will refer to the Margaret Herrick library, which stores production files and the finalized version of the screenplay for the film. Already existing interviews with writer-director Spike Lee and writer Kevin Wilmott can also reveal external challenges, such as location inaccessibility or language barriers, and convey their creative personas as related to their activist convictions.

I will then contemplate the social conditioning of an American standpoint, as theorized by prior scholarly works. To begin, I will study the ideological relationship between nationalism and antiracism in the Black veteran. I anticipate an understanding of this intertwining to decode the discreditable caricature of Vietnamese people in *Da 5 Bloods*, who contrast starkly with its powerful and prideful African-American characters. Nationalism must at times be contested as a product of American racism, especially when one takes into account the ethnocentric rationale of American supremacy that justified and moralized the intervention in Vietnam (King). Yet paradoxically, the positionality of the Black veteran can make it difficult for their antiracist narrative to pose effective criticism against contestable American nationalist ideals, because their address of racism in the Vietnam War often relies on demanding recognition for their undermined contributions to the country (McClancy). In other words, the significance of nationalism is implied and predicates antiracist arguments from the Black veteran. Consequently,

they are more likely to prioritize and reinforce American nationalist sentiments, rather than challenge it.

For further understanding of other constraints in an American mindset about the Vietnam War, I will also investigate the distorting effects of a hegemonic circulation of information about the subject. Scholars have conducted extensive assessments that attribute the American exclusive consumption of products and discourses made in America to their skewed perception of a multisided war (Chong, Anderegg). Following this line of critique, I believe the enthusiastic but limited engagement of Americans with the topic has perpetuated misconceptions about numerous aspects of this notoriously controversial conflict, and the long-standing misportrayal of Vietnamese people on the American screen stands out among these (V. Nguyen, Callaghan). In particular, in the case of *Da 5 Bloods*, by utilizing the angry Vietnamese to convey an imagined minority antagonism towards American white supremacist imperialism, the African-American filmmakers are imposing their Americanized ideas and psychology about racial violence, trauma and healing on another minority people. I will refer to non-American films and real accounts from non-American minorities in the Vietnam War to show how their responses to American racism are contextualized to be different from what is shown in *Da 5 Bloods* (Vuong, L. Nguyen, N. Nguyen, Win).

Expected Results:

I expect that this project will take five months to complete. I will consult with a mentor throughout the process via weekly sessions.

In the first two months, I will compose a comprehensive presentation of all practical evidences I found that can help make sense of the Vietnamese in *Da 5 Bloods*, followed by an

initial analysis of their emergence and influence drawing from both immediate inferences and theoretical support.

In the remaining three months, I will finalize the aforementioned analysis paper. Then, I will prepare a treatment for a new feature film that captures the Vietnamese in the most truthful light possible while still retaining the gravity of the African-American storyline. While it does not necessarily have to adopt the exact worldbuilding and characters from *Da 5 Bloods*, I view this creative addendum as my answer to what could have been, or an attempt to resolve the difficulties in portraying race relations that *Da 5 Bloods* may have encountered.

Conclusion:

Through my research, I intend to demonstrate that it is plausible to incorporate in fiction the theme of antiracism from a globalized angle, one that pays acute attention and respect to conditions unfamiliar to the social background of the creator. Furthermore, given the increasing appeal of storytelling as a prolific ground for activism and the undeniable urgency of racial justice both within and outside the United States, I am asserting that it is not just a matter of artistic competence to write and generate resonance from truth. Rather, it is of utmost importance that fictional accounts of society like the Vietnam War film be as honest and responsible as they can. Storytellers in taking on the role of the cultural informer must fully recognize their power over public attitudes. They must execute it with caution and empathy to catalyze positive social changes; in particular, to promote an inclusivity that transcends a mere lumping of groups with activist potential without critically acknowledging their differences.

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a. Week 1-3: Preparations	b. Week 4: Data collection	c. Week 5-8: Data analysis	d. Week 9-20: Writing
Draft questions' list: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> not exhaustive 	Conduct two interviews: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> 1-1.5 hours long earlier revisions of the screenplay 	Watch comparative films: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> American non-American 	Revise & Finalize paper
Contact interviewees: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> permission for disclosure of information clearly requested 	Access production files: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> bus travel to library scanning (if possible): story boards, shooting schedule, script, budget sheet, call sheet 	Read scholarly works: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Nationalism and race Minorities in American cinema and the Vietnam War U.S. media and public opinion 	Draft screenplay outline: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Brainstorm Characters Three acts Sequences Treatment
Set up: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> phone/laptop recorder virtual location 	Study existing press: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> live interviews articles 	Annotate & Write paper: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Collected data Outline for paper Write draft paper 	Proof-read & publication
20 weekly sessions with mentor, 1.5 hours/session			

Item	Estimated Average Cost per Unit	Estimated Number of Unit	Unit	Cost per Item
Interview	\$250	3	hour	\$750
Mentorship	\$35	20	session	\$700
Scanning	\$1	500	page	\$500
Book rent/purchase	\$15	10	book	\$150
Film rent/purchase	\$3	20	film	\$60
Travel	\$2.5	4	trip	\$10
Total Estimated Budget				\$2,170