FACULDADE DE LETRAS
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THE UNIVERSAL LANGUAGE OF POP CULTURE

SPIKE LEE'S FILMS AS NARRATIVES OF COUNTER-MEMORY

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RESUMO

A Linguagem Universal da Cultura Pop, os filmes de Spike Lee como narrativas de contra-memória.

Olhar os Estados Unidos e todos os mitos que rodeiam o país, bem como o seu impacto global, sempre foi crucial para perceber um mundo que, apesar de todas as mudanças, insiste em velhos problemas, tais como o racismo e a ascensão de velhas narrativas extremistas ligadas à supremacia branca. Dada a importância da chamada 'pop culture', ou cultura de massas, na disseminação desses mitos à escala global para puro entretenimento, mas também na discussão crítica desses mitos, escolhi três filmes do realizador Spike Lee, *Malcolm X* (1991), *Blackkklansman* (2018) e *Da 5 Bloods* (2020) como representativos dessa dinâmica. Embora associados à indústria de Hollywood, estas narrativas cinematográficas parecem-me ilustrar a forma como a cultura se presta a ser palco de perspetivas variadas, neste caso, acerca do lugar e identidade da comunidade Afro-Americana nos E.U.A. No primeiro capítulo, exponho o entendimento de 'pop' culture que guia a minha análise; não como cultura de massas, mas no sentido de cultura popular defendido pela Escola de Birmingham, que salienta o seu carácter de oposição às narrativas dominantes. Nos capítulos seguintes, procedo à análise de cada um dos filmes, com base na perspetiva de estudiosos da Critical Race Theory, que propõem a categoria 'raça' como construção social, e também o conceito de 'contra-memória', elaborado por George Lipsitz e que me permite explicar a função das representações cinematográficas em questão. A minha seleção dos filmes deveu-se à sua capacidade de revisitação das narrativas dominantes através da criação de contra-memórias. Tanto a nível temático, como pelas técnicas cinematográficas usadas por Lee, estes são três filmes que se envolvem com aspetos da História dos Estados Unidos e assim permitem uma melhor perceção da complexidade da sociedade norte-americana.

Palavras-chave: Cultura Popular; Representação; Contra-memória; Raça; Spike Lee.

ABSTRACT

The Universal Language of Pop Culture, Spike Lee's films as narratives of counter-memory.

Looking at the United States and all the myths surrounding the country, as well as its global impact, has always been crucial to understand a world that, despite all the changes, insists on old problems, such as racism and the rise of old extremist narratives linked to white supremacy. Given the importance of so-called 'pop culture', or mass culture, in disseminating these myths on a global scale for sheer entertainment, but also in critically discussing them, I have chosen three films by director Spike Lee, *Malcolm X* (1991), *Blackkklansman* (2018), and *Da 5 Bloods* (2020) as representative of that dynamics. Although associated with the Hollywood industry, these cinematic narratives illustrate, in my view, how culture lends itself to be the stage for varied perspectives, in this case, about the place

and identity of the African American community in the U.S.A. In the first chapter, I set out the understanding of 'pop' culture that guides my analysis; not as mass culture, but in the sense of popular culture advocated by the Birmingham School, which stresses its oppositional character to dominant narratives. In the following chapters, I analyze each of the films based on the perspectives of Critical Race Theory scholars, who propose the category 'race' as a social construction and George Lipsitz's elaboration of the concept 'counter-memory', which allows me to explain the function of the cinematic representations in question. My selection of the films was due to their ability to revisit dominant narratives through the creation of counter-memories. Both thematically and through the cinematic techniques used by Lee, these are three films that engage with aspects of U.S. history and thus allow for a better perception of the complexity of U.S. society.

Keywords: Popular Culture; Representation; Counter-memory; Race; Spike Lee.

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1. Introduction

I have always been a fan of movies. When the Internet was not the primary source of information, movies and television were a window to another world. As a child growing up in Portugal in the 1990s, I continued to be bathed in movies mainly from the Hollywood industry due to our poor national film production. Every Christmas, *Home Alone* (1990) and *Home Alone 2: Lost in New York* (1992) were on TV. These were good feeling movies in which I could see nothing wrong. At the same time, they provided me with visions of New York and the United States that I later realized were unrealistic. However, the Christmas of 2003 made me think more seriously about the role that films can play, namely their impact on the representation of various people and their ways of life, when a British film called *Love Actually* (directed by Richard Curtis) appeared on television. Of the six plots, the story that I disliked the most, because of the way they represented a Portuguese woman, was that of Jamie and Aurelia. For the first time, I was scandalized by a portrayal that was very much out of touch with reality. That shock at the film was a turning point for me because it made me think: "this is how the British see us"!

Consequently, I began to question the image I had of the United States that had been immortalized by so many cultural products that came through the same mass media vehicle, television. From the *Home Alone* movies to my mother's love of various television series, such as *Little House on the Prairie* (September 11, 1974 - March 21, 1983), *Bonanza* (September 12, 1959 - January 16, 1973), to her favorite miniseries *North and South* — which soon also became my favorite (November 3, 1985 - February 27, 1994), all these representations created on myself and my mother (and for the matter the thousands of people who watched them) a mythical perception of what 'America' was. Precisely, depending on whose perspective is telling the story, much of one's perception of the 'other' can be distorted and framed accordingly, and while certain films do nothing more than get a good laugh out of a particular audience, for some, they can also be analyzed through a very different lens.

For these same reasons, it is essential to discuss the impact of the Hollywood industry worldwide and how idealized and mystified specific images about 'America' have been, building throughout history a single narrative while excluding other voices about the same reality. On this topic, it is understandable then, why Spike Lee called for the need of a diversity of narratives, since "a lot of the narrative of these United States has been a false narrative" (Lee "Breaks Down" 00:03:25): he stresses how this false narrative has been handed down throughout the generations regarding the foundation of the U.S, which he states to be based on "immoral acts, the stealing of the land from the Native People" (00:03:54) and its genocide in tandem with " the stealing of my ancestors from mother Africa, brought here to endure slavery"(00:04:01). For Lee, " that's how this country

was built! (…) [T]he whole shit's foundation is fucked up. So, consequently, the narrative has been fucked up" (00:04:10; 00:04:26). But he also adds who or what is accountable for those distortions and myths: "if you want to keep that narrative going, based upon that, those immoral acts, you make up lies about the people you oppress. Simple, how is that done? Novels, songs, film, and television" (Lee "Breaks Down" 00:04:35 – 00:04:57).

Lee wants to point out exactly how the products that sold this false narrative were easily passed on through various forms, film being one of them. As my mother's love for the series I mentioned above, countless films with biased narratives perpetuated a distorted image about who the enemies and heroes were. Namely, genres like Western, where peace-disturbing Indians were the enemies to be put down; or series about the American Civil War and with them the nostalgic Old South narrative along with the Plantation genre where master and enslaved seemed to live in perfect harmony.

The problem lies in realizing that these types of biased narratives are not buried in the past. As an example, the struggle of opposing forces — on the traditional narratives versus the challenging ones — could not be more explicit when Spike Lee's *Blackkklansman* (2018) won the Oscar for Best Adapted Screenplay and Joel and Ethan Coen's *The Ballad of Buster Scruggs* (2018) — a modern Western narrative composed by six short stories perpetuating a mystified vision of 'America,' — was side by side with Lee's film, both nominated for the same category. As a brief example, within the six short stories in Joel and Ethan Coen's film, *The Gal Who Got Rattled* (based on the story with the same name, written in 1901 by Stewart Edward White) still represents the Indians as cruel villains, and the girl, terrified of falling at their hands, kills herself before that happens. This scene is not groundbreaking but reminiscent of another one if one goes back to the quintessential American classic D. W. Griffith' *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). Here the villains are not the Indians but the Blacks and similarly, Flora Cameron jumps off a cliff so that Gus does not rape her.

Taking American Studies as my critical perspective, all this evidence led me to think about African Americans' hidden stories and how much their depictions also in history were distorted, erased, or neglected. How much was popular culture contributing negatively to perpetuating the same old narratives, as so many stereotypes can be exhibited on-screen, negatively impacting the group being depicted? Not just on how the others see them, but moreover, on their self-perceptions. Additionally, how biased is our knowledge of who we think to be 'different', only because certain narratives made us think so? How often does one think of 'America' and pictures of a white man, a cowboy, an eagle, or caravans going West come to his/her mind? And how many hidden stories were removed from this imaginary rather than being perpetuated by popular culture? How much of that picture is left for the viewer to complete?

These issues become even more relevant, like the Spike Lee's quote exemplified above, bearing in mind that certain popular cultural products have become a stage for conveying messages about life, touching on sensitive issues that ultimately also become political issues. As such, if popular culture has been a weapon to popularize certain narratives, it simultaneously has the power to reverse them, to build and strengthen interactions with people, to spread a different message that may positively change the way we perceive the world and the people who are a part of it. In film, if certain narratives have been biased, the reverse role of popular culture and its power to defy them is there as well: "Popular culture becomes a staging ground for the constant battle to uphold and support (…) systems of power, while at the same time pointing out their weaknesses and inspiring in us a desire to change" (Brandt and Clare 38).

All these questions led me to the fabulous path of finding Spike Lee's 'joints', and the crux of my thesis is to show how Spike Lee can be an example of a popular culture film director who does not however abide by the common principles of simplistic representations that perpetuate the *status quo.* Lee is on the defying side, not settling on creating feel-good movies, but being ultimately a voice for African Americans, who have been so neglected in cinematic representations throughout the history of the Hollywood industry. To decide to work on Spike Lee's 'joints' is also to assert my personal and political views. To deny or ignore the racial divide that has always been a part of U.S. society, from the beginning to the present, would be to perpetuate the usual narratives that I am challenging in this thesis. It would be to ignore the internal tensions in the U.S. exposed in plain sight and happening while I write this thesis. Proof of this is the infamous murder of George Floyd; the demonstrations that followed; the influence of the Black Lives Matter movement, both in the United States and globally; and Donald's Trump far-right speech that led to the invasion of the U.S. Capitol by a mob of M.A.G.A.[1] supporters as an attempt to overthrow the 2020 U.S. presidential election are a few examples.

Given the overall influence that the United States has worldwide, choosing not to address these issues would also be to ignore the same phenomena, possibly influenced by the U.S. society, that are increasing worldwide, such as the growth of right-wing populist parties. Therefore, because Spike Lee does not create empty fictional characters, and his films carry a political message, he is the leading example in today's cinema proving that a film is not mere entertainment, or that popular culture can be more complex than one believes.

His 'joints'— the name by which he chooses to call his films as they are a combination of film, photo and footage — are provocative, informative, and always address important issues, especially the racial divide that continues to be at the core of U.S. internal conflicts. His stories show us examples of

[1] M.A.G.A. stands for "Make America Great Again", which was Donald Trump's 2016 campaign slogan.

the injustices that Black people have endured throughout U.S. history, giving the viewer an alternative version of the Master Narrative, that with which one is already familiarized. His films are a weapon that, by reaching larger audiences and displaying the common humanity we all share, most of the times by his use of real footage of events, can become a universal language that will contribute to a better understanding of what was thought to be "different," thus bringing people closer to critical issues that could otherwise go unnoticed.

Therefore, and to prove my argument that popular culture can be a universal language, and that Spike Lee is a prime example of it, this thesis will be organized as follows: first, I will reflect on the role of culture and, more specifically, of what can be defined as Popular Culture and how one can relate Spike Lee's films to this category. Then, I will delve on three of his 'joints' in the following order: *Malcolm X* (1991), *Blackkklansman* (2018), and *Da 5 Bloods* (2020). The analysis of his films will consider themes such as the lack of representation of African Americans in film and their neglected stories in relation to the dominant culture; the negative impact that some films have had by perpetuating old stereotypes and the immediate results of these misrepresentations on Black lives.

Aspects about African American leaders, politics of beauty, and white hegemony will be addressed in all the three films; in *Malcolm X,* the (hi)story of a controversial figure that the dominant narrative tried to erase, will lead me to analyze the role of history and how popular culture can contribute to complement it with different narratives. In *Blackkklansman*, issues of race will be yet more central, and I will support my arguments on Critical Race Theory and the definition of 'race' as a social construction. I will also focus on the role of white supremacy in U.S. society as well as the impact of the Ku Klux Klan in the past and its ties to the present. Finally, *Da 5 Bloods* recaptures the hidden (hi)story of African Americans who fought for a country that, despite despising them, inspired as much patriotism in them as in their white counterparts. This last film was further due because the most famous cinematic representations, from *Rambo* to *Platoon*, to the popular figure of *Chuck Norris*, kept on perpetuating the idea that only whites fought in wars, failing to represent and speak out to the fact that despite being only 11% of the U.S. population at the time, African Americans corresponded to 32% of the militaries fighting in the Vietnam War.

My thesis aims to respond to a crucial and up-to-date agenda that seeks to contribute to a great awareness of the history, perspectives, missing narratives, and an ongoing struggle and vindication of the rights of African Americans in U.S society. To this end, I aim to communicate about how popular culture can be a mechanism to rescue different perspectives for our present, and in doing so, draw attention to issues that are cross-cutting for everyone and not only exclusively to the U.S society.

2. Reflections on popular culture and Spike Lee's films

The study of popular culture, and consequently its products, seems apparently to be stress-free. However, on the contrary, nothing seems to be more difficult than to study what might be considered banal. Moreover, when defining popular culture, one stumbles upon several different definitions throughout time. Many of them were simply refuted by those succeeding them. For this reason, one should consider that the analysis on any product is itself an analysis of the times when it was produced.

Observing then all the conflicts generated over time around a single definition, one of the conclusions reached by John Storey is that "pop culture is in effect an *empty* conceptual category, one that can be filled in a wide variety of often conflicting ways, depending on the context we use" (Storey, *Culture Theory* 1; italics in the original). Accordingly, a particular product may not be perceived as belonging to popular culture depending on one's position over the term. For this reason, I identify Spike Lee and his films — specifically the ones I will be analyzing in this thesis, *Malcolm X*, *Blackkklansman* and, *Da 5 Bloods* — as falling within the scope of popular culture.

Firstly, the main intention of this chapter is to understand what is meant by the concept of 'culture' and later to bridge the gap to popular culture. I will briefly comment on the general debates generated about the concept of culture, mainly focusing on film as a specific cultural product. These critiques will help understand the main differences between a mass culture product and a popular culture product — two different concepts that have often (and wrongly) been used as synonyms. These debates will allow me to analyze and position Spike Lee's films.

Secondly, and connected directly to the previous idea, my aim is to understand why Spike Lee's films can be both a popular culture product and still offer alternative insights on the African American community and American culture in general (if not worldwide). Assuming that his films are popular culture *a priori* excludes the idea that they may fit into mass culture, folk culture, or any other subdivisions of culture, which often seem to be mistakenly presented as synonyms.

The very study of popular culture may be defined under this theoretical distinction, "implicitly or explicitly, in contrast to other conceptual categories: folk culture, mass culture, high culture, dominant culture, working-class culture" (Storey *Culture Theory* 1). These comparisons of different types of culture have eventually shaped and better defined at least what popular culture is not. Still, before moving into these conclusions and to better comprehend them, it is essential to deepen the very concept of culture, a word that Raymond Williams has claimed to be "one of the two or three most complicated words in the English Language" (*Keywords* 49), and which has created essential and also opposing debates.

A first definition, which Raymond Williams also introduces, is the view of culture as a "process of human development" (Keywords 49), which goes in line with traditional notions that considered culture as encompassing a body of specific works meaningful to an educated minority. Culture was a higher value, "the best that has been thought and said" (Arnold 5) of a particular society, a spiritual aesthetic achievement, the gathering of the best ideas around literature, art, or music — an elitist notion of culture.

This conception arose amidst the growth of industrialization in England in the second half of the 19th century, a time of revolutionary technological changes that led to the appearance of a new working-class into the social scene. Some conservatives, fearful of the fast reproduction of cultural products and their fast distribution to this working-class, founded their arguments on the very idea of culture as superior to the 'other' culture arising from industrialization, that of the urban workers, the so-called masses. Amongst these, Mathew Arnold, a renowned poet of the Victorian era, was one of the first to express reservations and suspicions about this 'other' culture. In his *Culture and Anarchy*, first published in 1869, it was clear that he associated the concept of culture with a set of traditions and behaviors — commonly connected to the educated elites — that could easily be contrasted to the growing anarchy he believed to be created by this 'other' culture. For Arnold, 'culture' was the deliberate search for perfection, and his only recommendation as "the great help out of our difficulties" (5). 'Culture' was the "pursuit of our total perfection" which would be acquired through education, what he calls the "means of getting to know" (5). On the other hand, 'culture' was conflicted with anarchy, its "most resolute enemy" (150). Therefore, the defenders of 'culture' were "unswervingly and with a good conscience the opposers of anarchy" (150). Anarchy was a system that frightened a superior elite since it was presented as accessible to all the people, eventually making the working-class question their hierarchical social place and act in an insubordinate way towards this same elite.

This position was, in the end, a strategy for an upper class to assert its power by separating the classes by the products they consumed. However, this discrimination of products and to what class they belonged was flawed, as it operated on differentiated tastes, which, as Pierre Bordieu claimed, "function as markers of 'class'" (1-2):

> Whereas the ideology of charisma regards taste in legitimate culture as a gift of nature, scientific observation shows that cultural needs are the product of upbringing and education: surveys establish that all cultural practices (museum visits, concert-going, reading etc.) , and preferences in literature, painting or music, are closely linked to educational level (measured by qualifications or length of schooling) and secondarily to social origin. (...) Culture also has

> its titles of nobility — awarded by the educational system — and its pedigrees, measured by seniority in admission to the nobility (1-2).

What can be concluded is that this definition of culture was not democratic but exclusive to a minority, an educated group whose practices were based on its education level and social origin.

However, this other culture deriving from mass production and distributed to a broader audience than ever before did not concern only an upper-class elite worried that it could endanger social stability. The Frankfurt School also criticized it, but for doing precisely the opposite. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno claimed that the products of this industry, such as films, radio, or newspapers, were mere standardized commodities that denied individualism and manipulated people into passivity, simply becoming consumers of the same industry. The culture industry offered homogeneous commodities forming a system in which "each branch of culture is unanimous within itself, and all are unanimous together" (94). This resemblance between products only gave consumers the illusory idea that they were choosing from a great variety when it was not the case. In short, this industry deceived "its consumers out of what it endlessly promises" (Adorno and Horkheimer 111).

These products must be understood under the concept of mass culture, a culture that "is mass-produced for mass consumption" and whose "audience is a mass of non-discriminating consumers," a culture which is "formulaic, manipulative" and "consumed with brain-numbed and brain-numbing passivity" (Storey Culture *Theory* 8). This critique of the passivity enhanced by mass cultural products is defended precisely by Horkheimer and Adorno and exemplified with film as the ultimate cultural product for conformity, distracting consumers from their real lives, and depriving them of any rationality, a most relevant critique for this thesis (Adorno and Horkheimer 100).

According to Adorno and Horkheimer's view, since films would only bring superficiality, passivity, and distraction, cinemagoers would not be agents engaged with the pictures, but instead they had no room for their imagination. A film was merely presented as an escape from their real lives, a product which turned out to be "familiar from other films and other culture products" alone (Adorno and Horkheimer 100). By witnessing if not mockingly living the imitation of life on the screen, consumers would turn out to be satisfied with their own lives. This same sense of familiarity and conformity would make consumers feel satisfaction and conform to the product rather than questioning its validity. Consumers would be so relaxed and "so absorbed by the world of the movie" (100) that they would not challenge the same industry in the end (Adorno 107).

Unlike previous perspectives, which feared mass culture for insubordination, Horkheimer and Adorno feared that the cultural commodities produced by the industry, due to their shallowness and

emptiness, could function in the opposite way and perpetuate established social hierarchies. However, the Frankfurt School was not only composed of such views. Walter Benjamin, part of the group, presented a more positive view about film as a cultural product. In his essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, he advocates for the democratization of art, which will only happen exactly due to mechanical reproduction. For the first time, technology allowed the reproduction of a single work of art, placing "the copy of the original into situations which would be out of reach for the original itself" (220), something until then impossible to happen. Given its original uniqueness, a single work of art could only be seen in one location, but now it could reach a wider audience due to technological reproduction.

The uniqueness of a work of art in previous historical periods and the effect one has when confronting it in a particular time and place is, throughout the essay, defined as its 'aura.' Now, with technological reproduction, the 'aura' gradually disappears. Nevertheless, this is not perceived as totally unfavorable. On the contrary, for Benjamin, it is seen as positive; the more a work of art loses its aura, the more reproduced it will be, hence the more democratic it will get as it reached a wider audience (224). For Benjamin, among the works that could be reproduced, 'film' was the best to transform the masses. Unlike his colleagues, who saw it as a commodity that turned people into mere consumers of images and dreams, Benjamin saw it as a process of art itself and possibly one of the most valuable. Unlike other art forms like theater, in which the audience could not interact with the actors, 'film' allowed people to criticize the presented product without disturbing the film, thus awakening the critical spirit of the audience who could react directly to it (228-229).

In addition, mechanical reproduction through film had altered the public's reaction to the product. Whereas a single work of art did not allow a large audience to observe it, 'film' had this advantage on its side. Moreover, audiences often needed its message to be interpreted by an expert on the matter, so they could appreciate and understand it. Film was revolutionary as it allowed the public to break free from this orientation. The more popular and influential a film's social content was, the more people could enjoy its message without any additional help. According to Benjamin, this revolutionary change democratized art and brought it to larger audiences (234).

The most notorious difference brought up by Benjamin is that film, by allowing people to engage politically with it, reverted their role of consumers by turning them into agents. Benjamin offers a more democratic and human definition that brings the perspective of a people into the picture, and that goes further than previous assumptions of culture linked to simply reading a great work of literature, seeing a memorable painting, or the idea of culture being imposed by the industry, in which people had no participation. It is this very notion that best matches the definition of culture presented by Raymond Williams, who considered it as "ordinary," or a "way of life" ("Culture is ordinary" 4).

Williams does not deny the value of culture as the "known meanings and directions," which is to say, culture connected to the knowledge obtained through education ("Culture is ordinary" 4). However, his contribution to the definition of culture is relevant as he added the idea "new observations" and "the common meanings," suggesting that culture embodies the practices one inherits and performs in everyday life (4). Every person is an agent of culture who lives in specific communities and has created a sense of their surrounding world. This idea is embraced by Stuart Hall, who advocated that culture is "about 'shared meanings'" of a group, which "are produced and exchanged" through language (Hall et al. xvii). Culture is then comprehended as a set of values that holds people together:

> To say that two people belong to the same culture is to say that they interpret the world in roughly the same ways and can express themselves, their thoughts and feelings about the world, in ways which will be understood by each other. Thus, culture depends on its participants interpreting meaningfully what is happening around them, and 'making sense' of the world, in broadly similar ways (Hall et al. xix).

Culture is then, ways of life, rituals that people practice in everyday life, how they behave and are commonly recognized by the group they belong to and whose practices are carried out through language, the primary vehicle for creating a sense of the world around them. This notion of culture gives agency to individuals, who are participants in the whole cultural process and not merely consumers, whether of an elitist culture or of a mass culture where individualism is denied to them. This view on culture will be the basis for my working definition of popular culture.

When analyzing the concept of popular culture, John Storey presents six distinct explanations, of which I will consider the first four. First, he argues that popular culture is "widely favoured or well-liked by many people" (*Culture Theory* 5). However, this idea seems too vague and insufficient, lacking a "quantitative dimension," which would question the very concept of the adjective "popular" (5).

A second proposal for popular culture is "the culture that is left over after we have decided what is high culture" (*Culture Theory* 5). However, popular culture seems to be immediately conceived as an inferior culture since it does not meet the demands of an allegedly superior culture. Furthermore, as discussed concerning the concept of culture itself, the value of culture under the judgment of taste is a class construct, therefore not unproblematic.

A third definition examines erroneous notions which often present popular culture as mass culture. This definition meets the demands of individuals who "want to establish (…) popular culture [a]s a hopelessly commercial culture" (*Culture Theory* 8). However, as debated before, if film may be a mass culture product that denies people's creativity, it may also work in the opposite direction.

A fourth definition "contends that popular culture is the culture that originates from 'the people'" (*Culture Theory* 9). Still, very much like in the first definition, Storey questions "who qualifies for inclusion in the category 'the people'" (9). Moreover, this definition neglects "the 'commercial' nature of much of the resources from which popular culture is made" (9). However, it is not without conflict that Spike Lee struggles with the same industry, particularly Hollywood, with which he has "had a very rocky relationship" (Cunningham and Lee). Storey argues that "people do not spontaneously produce culture from raw materials of their own making" and "whatever popular culture is, what is certain is that its raw materials are those that are commercially provided" (*Culture Theory* 9). Spike Lee's films can be thought of within this dilemma. They can be considered a product about the people and for the people (whoever 'those people' are). However, one cannot deny the industry's commercial nature and their power of production and distribution, nonetheless. Also, Lee's films cannot be considered folk culture — a culture embraced by a particular rural small group — due to their commercial nature. This commercial side is undeniable, for even though his films are not considered a mass cultural product, they still rely on mass dissemination vehicles, such as the mass media, to reach their intended audience.

If these four definitions do not clearly define what popular culture is, at least they exclude what it is not. Popular culture is not only appreciated by a large audience, nor is it an inferior culture. It is not folk culture as this definition is too exclusive and linked to "a quasi-mythical rural" community (Storey "Popular Culture" 1). By exclusion, it is also understood that popular culture is "definitely a culture that only emerged following industrialization and urbanization" (Storey *Culture Theory* 12).

Stuart Hall adds another important edge, when he refers to the term popular as "the culture of the oppressed, the excluded classes" (Hall "Notes" 71). This designation encompasses an "alliance of classes and forces which constitute the 'popular classes,' and that goes against "the culture of the power-bloc" (71). Notwithstanding the validity of previous attempts to define popular culture, the definition of popular culture that works best in terms of my critical perspective and argumentation is that provided by Stuart Hall. For Hall, culture is "organized around the contradiction: the popular forces versus the power-bloc" (71):

> Popular culture is one of the sites where this struggle for and against a culture of the powerful is engaged: it is also the stake to be won or lost in that struggle. It is the arena of consent and resistance. It is partly where hegemony arises, and where it is secured. It is not a sphere where socialism, a socialist culture — already fully formed — might be simply 'expressed'. But it is one of the places where socialism might be constituted (Hall, "Notes" 71).

Following Hall, I take popular culture as the field where transformation occurs in society and the place where individuals find their self-expression. Ultimately, people have a role and are allowed to participate in this transformation. As a film director, Spike Lee is within this framework: an active individual who, through his films, has found his self-expression for resistance. Precisely what Hall claims to be the struggle "against a culture of the powerful." More specifically, this struggle is understood in dispute with the dominant culture in U.S society, represented by middle-class whites of Northern European descent whose culture is represented in most cultural products, Hollywood being one of the main industries where this is verified.

As for this cultural dominance that is passed off as the norm, the concept of ideology explains this point. In *Culture Theory and Popular Culture an Introduction,* John Storey states that both ideas of "culture and ideology do cover much the same conceptual landscape. The main difference between them is that ideology brings a political dimension to the shared terrain." (4-5). Storey presents ideology as "a systematic body of ideas articulated by a particular group of people" (*2*), and "a certain masking, distortion or concealment (…) to indicate how some texts and practices present distorted images of reality" (2). He hence argues that "ideological forms" are used to "draw attention to the way in which texts (television fiction, pop songs, novels, feature films, etc.) always present a particular image of the world." (3). Storey adds that this understanding relies "on a notion of society as conflictual rather than consensual, structured around inequality, exploitation and oppression. Texts are said to take sides, consciously or unconsciously, in this conflict" (3).

These ideas are crucial for understanding the role of popular culture and for analyzing Spike Lee's films. If films belong to the sphere of popular culture — the field where both consent and resistance happen — then it is necessary to analyze them by considering their ideological potential. In this sense, Hollywood cinema can represent both sides, one perpetuating the discourse of the powerful, which usually distorts reality in their favor, or its resistance, by presenting the view of those who are marginalized by the same dominant ideology. This struggle on both sides is even more relevant given the inequality in U.S. society, which aligns with Storey's last definition of ideology. For this reason, according to Douglas Kellner:

> Contemporary Hollywood cinema can be read as a contest of representations and a contested terrain that reproduces existing social struggles and transcodes the political discourses of the era. I use the term *transcode* to describe how specific political discourses like Reaganism or liberalism are translated, or encoded, into media texts. For example, *Easy Rider* (1969) and *Woodstock* (1979) transcode the discourses of the 1960s counterculture into cinematic texts in image, sound, dialogue, scene, and narrative. Films like *Red Dawn* (1984) and *Rambo* (1984) transcode the conservative discourses of Reaganism (Kellner 2; italics in the original).

If films also transcode the politics of an era, what I want to question is not only how Spike Lee's films transcode messages from a particular time, but also how they can be considered pioneers in creating a new discourse of resistance, especially concerning issues of racial injustice in U.S. society. While Spike Lee's films may be more focused on offering representations of and for African Americans, the awareness of these issues is not exclusively aimed at them but is equally intended for a wider audience.

Spike Lee's film, or 'joint' as he likes to call his films, released in 1989, *Do the Right Thing* is an excellent example of the awareness he wants to raise around existing racial conflicts in U.S. society. Even though I will be focusing on different films, *Do the Right Thing,* considered one of his masterpieces, is unavoidable because it set a new direction about the representation of racial conflict, and the intermingling of history and fiction that Lee would develop in a more straightforward manner in later films. The plot is centered around the racial tensions in a Brooklyn neighborhood in the hottest day of the 1989 summer. More specifically, it focuses on Sal (performed by Danny Aiello) and his Italian American sons, who own a local pizzeria, and how they interact with the growing African American neighbors who are their main customers. Among the many emblematic scenes in the film, the one that may best deconstruct the concept of 'race' happens after the murder of Radio Raheem (performed by Bill Nunn) and the subsequent destruction and burning of Sal's pizzeria. The mob, composed mainly of African Americans, infuriated by the events, turns to the grocery shop in front of the pizzeria that a Korean family owns. The Korean man tries to defend himself and his family by shouting to the mob, "I'm no white, I'm black (…) You, me, the same" (Lee *Do the Right Thing* 01:40:17 – 01:40:24*)*. This emblematic scene proves how much the concept of 'race' goes far beyond skin color; it is rather a social construction built to establish a difference between members of the dominant culture versus those of minorities. The Korean man is as "black" as the African Americans, only because both are understood as minorities in the U.S. society and not a legitimate part of the dominant culture.

Even though films are the focus of this thesis, it is hard not to mention the power of music in them. As the best example, *"*Fight the Power," the song that Radio Raheem kept playing on the streets, was requested precisely by Spike Lee to Chuck D from the band Public Enemy to be played in the film. The song is a clear example of a popular culture product, as it challenged the norm imposed by the dominant white culture and touched on political messages, demonstrating that popular culture is a political field and therefore goes beyond mere entertainment:

> 1989, the number another summer (…) People, people we are the same/ No we're not the same/ 'Cause we don't know the game/ What we need is awareness, we can't get careless (…) / Elvis was a hero to most/ But he never meant shit to me you see/ Straight up racist that sucker was/ Simple and plain/ Mother fuck him and John Wayne/'Cause I'm Black and I'm

> proud/I'm ready and hyped plus I'm amped/ Most of my heroes don't appear on no stamps/ Sample a look back you look and find/Nothing but rednecks for 400 years if you check (Public Enemy 0:18 – 2:54).

This "game" is the norm established by the dominant white culture that is neither accepted nor recognized by the African American community, which is "not the same.*"* This same norm that presented certain idols like Elvis Presley or John Wayne as representative of everyone failed to recognize that they were only icons for their part of society. The African American community did not recognize the so-called King of Rock & Roll and saw him as a "straight-up racist," "simple and plain." In turn, the song itself made indirect references to the real heroes of the African American community, such as the Black Panther's slogan "Power to the people" and James Brown's song "Say it loud, I'm black, and I'm proud." The idealized white heroes were contrasted with their own, which did not "appear on no stamps." The point is actually dramatized in the film, in the scene where a discussion begins about the absence of African Americans on the wall portraits of Sal's pizzeria, which comes along with the desire to tear down the white references that only Sal appreciated; as mentioned by Sterritt "This roll call stands in melancholy contrast to the list of Afro-American greats spoken by Mister Señor Love Daddy and the collage of Italian-American greats celebrated on Sal's wall. None of these slain New Yorkers could be called great in a conventional sense, but in Spike Lee's America their memory lives on" (73).

Both song and film were representatives of 1980s New York — however, given the current murders of African Americans, they could, unfortunately, be about today as well — a decade marked by racist mobs and police attacks killing African Americans. Like the cases of Willie Turks whose "death occurred during an unprovoked, racially-motivated attack by a mob of young whites" (Fried 1). Such was also the case of Eleanor Bumpers, "a 67-year-old Bronx woman (...) evicted from a city housing project for nonpayment of rent" (Buder 3), and Michael Stewart, whose "family contends that he was beaten to death while in custody" (The Associated Press 7). Some of these victims are mentioned in the film right after Radio Raheem's death by the police: "They did it again just like Michael Stewart," (Lee *Do the Right Thing* 01:36:29) shouts a character, followed right afterwards by another one who says, "murder, Elanor Bumpers, murder!" (Lee *Do the Right Thing* 01:36:32). Finally, their names appear in the film's final credits where one can read that it was "Dedicated to the families of Eleanor Bumpers, Michael Griffith, Arthur Miller, Edmund Perry, Yvonne Smallwood [and] Michael Stewart" (Lee *Do the Right Thing* 01:53:43). Despite *Do the Right Thing* being a fictional story, Lee wants to prove that the line between film and reality is relatively thin, as proven by the actual murders and which Lee makes a point in mentioning and by the murder of the character Radio Raheem, who was chocked by the police. With the recent murder of George Floyd in similar circumstances, which

unfortunately only adds to a sad and enormous list, Spike Lee's films show that popular culture is not an empty and hollow category; on the contrary, his films are always a reminder of some relevant non-fictional aspect and an alert for the emergence of social change.

To round off the issue of popular culture, I would like to add that many Hollywood films may be identified as mass culture, hence analyzed in the light of the theoretical frame presented before. Many of these mainstream movies do nothing but give a sense of comfort to the spectator who leaves the cinema, indeed, feeling lightly satisfied. These movies do not seem to awaken anyone's critical awareness since their light content presents nothing to be contested. Unlike many of these mainstream movies, Spike Lee's "joints" are not intended to give any sense of comfort but, on the contrary, to confront the spectator with specific harsh realities with which the viewer can engage, something that goes in line with Benjamin's perspective on the political potential of film. This same struggle is conveyed by most of his recurrent themes, which according to David Sterritt, are mainly the following:

> His determination to carve out and maintain a resolutely independent presence in a film industry almost entirely controlled by white men with big money. (…) His continual willingness to raise hard questions and problems confronting contemporary America without claiming to have the illusory solutions and make-believe answers that mainstream movies constantly peddle. Lee's pictures are designed to challenge and provoke us, not ease our minds or pacify our emotions. (7-8)

Spike Lee's films are a popular cultural product as he participates in the resistance against the dominant culture, creating challenging films and bringing new perspectives onto the cultural field. That is, by giving voice to issues such as racial tensions in U.S. society, he ultimately brings them into a discussion with a broader audience, including white people.

Popular culture is then the terrain where forces of resistance and tradition operate. It is a powerful tool that people can use to finally have a role in transforming society by "fighting the power." In a world where so many factors divide society, from religion to politics, some connections show the common humanity we all share. The recognition of injustice, oppression, and revolt is familiar to all, and these are factors with which pop culture works. And suppose one of the revolutions of the film, according to Walter Benjamin, was to democratize art so that everybody could more easily understand it. In that case, pop culture, namely 'film' as one of its products, uses this universal language that speaks, above all, of feelings that all of us can recognize.

Therefore, this is how popular culture can be a universal language—showing the common humanity of us all, bringing into discussion what has been unknown, shocking, and confronting the

spectator while erasing previous ideas that stereotypes may have diminished—ultimately bringing social progress to society. In the end, "that is why 'popular culture' matters" (Hall et al. 71).

3. Spike Lee's *Malcolm X*: counter-memory and a pop culture hero for a renewed African American identity[2]

3.1. Challenging the past: contesting old representations and reclaiming neglected voices

In June 2020, John Ridley, the screenwriter of the film *12 Years a Slave* (2013), wrote an article in the *Los Angeles Times* in which he called on HBO to temporarily remove the epic film *Gone with the Wind* (1939) from its platform for its misleading and false depictions of slavery. Ridley claimed that these kinds of depictions are among the cause "that has helped to perpetuate the racism that's causing angry and grieving Americans to take to the streets" (Ridley). These accusations came at yet another time of revolt by African Americans, namely, the murder of George Floyd on May 25th, 2020, another African American added to the list of his equals murdered at the hands of the police. The uprisings and protests that followed extended beyond the streets. Namely, Hollywood's representations began to be questioned once again, not only current ones but also those in past film narratives that, while explicitly racist, continue to be shown without any historical explanation:

> Let me be real clear: I don't believe in censorship. I don't think "Gone with the Wind" should be relegated to a vault in Burbank. I would just ask, after a respectful amount of time has passed, that the film be re-introduced to the HBO Max platform along with other films that give a more broad-based and complete picture of what slavery and the Confederacy truly were. Or, perhaps it could be paired with conversations about narratives and why it's important to have many voices sharing stories from different perspectives rather than merely those reinforcing the views of the prevailing culture (Ridley).

Ridley's statement is part of a broader contestation by African Americans in the struggle for equality in the U.S. society, in which it includes the right to take the reins of their own history. This struggle involves the need to begin to look at history and question how much of a one-sided perspective is being handed down as representative of everyone's "truth." Within this contestation, films are as much an object of contestation as any other cultural text. As popular cultural texts, films are targets for messages with certain ideological biases, and therefore may be hiding and distorting

[2] I am aware of the difficulties in working with a single African American identity when this generalization has been the subject of much debate within the African American community itself. Given the history of so many Black people who were taken from Africa to endure slavery in other continents, to speak of a single Black Identity neglects the different histories of Black peoples across the American continent. Therefore, I lean more towards Paul Gilroy's concept of the Black Atlantic, in which he explains that blackness is not an absolute identity, but this Black Atlantic has been diffused in the sense of a plurality of different histories, hence different identities. Nonetheless, and still according to Gilroy, blackness may be "a common experience of powerlessness somehow transcending history and experienced in racial categories," which may be "enough to secure affinity between these divergent patterns of subordination" (Gilroy 58-59). Therefore, my intention in mentioning an African American identity relates to a common history of suffering and social exclusion as a factor that could unite them, despite the differences among Black Americans.

reality in favor of those in power, creating and perpetuating the master's narrative about national identity. For this reason, and concerning the Hollywood Industry, Ed Guerrero states that:

> The representation of black people on the commercial screen has amounted to one grand, multifaceted illusion. For blacks have been subordinated, marginalized, positioned, and devalued in every possible manner to glorify and relentlessly hold in place the white-dominated symbolic order and racial hierarchy of American society (2).

From the beginning, films were filled with demeaning depictions of African Americans, which were, for Donald Bogle, "a parade of embarrassing, insulting and demeaning caricatures," explained by the "rigid stereotypes of the minstrel shows that had been so popular in the 19th century" (3). These films, which continued the tradition of not only excluding African Americans from society but also insulting them, carried on with stereotypes such as "portraits of the Negro as a comic, childlike, often enough grotesque Dark Other – an oddity in American life and culture" (3). In short, representations of Black people in the Hollywood Industry followed a set of stereotypes, which distorted their history and identities while reflecting the ideology of the dominant white culture.

Among other film genres, the plantation is one of those most responsible for propagating these stereotypes and the subsequent downgrading of African Americans. The images seen in this genre continued to place the signifier black — linked to ideas of wilderness, primitiveness, and naturally lazy — in direct opposition to white, which in turn signified more refined. These same stereotypes came to be represented in this genre and in popular culture in general. As an example, the friendly face of Aunt Jemima, a figure based on the mommy stereotype, — linked to the large, subservient, muscular black women who worked in the master's house — remained the Pearl Milling Company's trademark for its pancake mix until 2020, when it was rebranded (Haworth). In addition, Donald Bogle also identifies stereotypes linked to the idea of Black Toms (good, submissive men), Coons (dull black men), Mulattoes (exotic and sexy), Bucks (big, violent men), all present in the Hollywood plantation genre (qtd. in Barker and Jane 315).

The most classic and racist example of this genre is *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), with which Spike Lee will engage in some of his films. The film, produced, directed, and edited by D. W. Griffith, is a clear reflection of the ideology that celebrated the antebellum South and its romantic ideas of the Lost Cause,[3] while placing African Americans as the cause of the demise of the civilization of the 'Old South.'

[3] The myth of the Lost Cause was a romanticized rewriting of the American Civil War narrative, which reinforced nobility on the part of the Confederacy upon its defeat while neglecting slavery as the actual cause of the war. Among other false ideas, this narrative altered the historical perspective insofar as it understood that the slavery system was not harmful and that the enslaved would live better if within it. Moreover, slavery having been abolished, this myth seemed to present itself to justify the deaths of southern soldiers who, apparently outnumbered, had died at the hands of northern soldiers.

Besides its historical inaccuracy, its most scandalous feature is its overtly racist message. Set during two periods of U.S. history, the Civil War and Reconstruction, the film's two acts are divided according to this timeline. The first act, about the Civil War, tells the perspective of two upper-class families: the Stoneman's family from the North and Cameron's family from the South.

Notwithstanding the distorted version of the civil war, it is the second act that is most controversial. Focusing on the Reconstruction, this period is depicted as a time of failure and disaster caused by the Black vote "while the leading whites are disfranchised" (*The Birth of a Nation* 1:53:30). The patriarch of the Stoneman family, Austin Stoneman, was influenced by the historical figure of Thaddeus Stevens (1792-1868), a member of the U.S. House of Representatives. Stevens was an abolitionist and radical Republican who had his share of responsibility in creating the doctrine of forty acres and a mule[4], attempting to redistribute land among newly freed slaves while punishing Southern plantation owners. Abolitionists and Republicans alike aimed to uphold the rights of Blacks during the Reconstruction, including their right to vote. This is portrayed in a particular scene that shows that "the negro party", meant as an offense to the Republican party that had granted votes to Blacks, is "in control of the representatives, 101 blacks against 23 whites" in the session of 1871 (*The Birth of a Nation* 1:59:47). In this session, Blacks are portrayed grotesquely, acting either wildly or in childish ways, drinking, eating chicken with their hands, and taking off their shoes. This representation, entirely disengaged from the characters' political functions, makes one believe that they were incapable of such responsibilities, legitimating not only those who denied Blacks their right to vote but also proving how integrationist policies had failed.

Among other influences, such as Thomas Dixon's novel *The Clansman: a Historical Romance of the Ku Klux Klan* (1905), the film was also based on the historical interpretation of the *History of the American People,* written by the southern historian and future President Woodrow Wilson, a supporter of segregation. According to Guerrero, "Wilson (…) wrote of Reconstruction as a policy that 'put the white South under the heel of the black South' and that finally provoked the organization and actions of the Ku Klux Klan" (11), words which also stand out in the film (1:32:28). There is more to say about the film, namely how, in addition to distorting historical facts, it contributed to the construction of concepts of whiteness and blackness, which will later be examined further in the subchapter "Can

[4] "Forty acres and a mule" is a line taken from the military order Special Field Orders No. 15. It is also the name of Spike Lee's Filmworks production company, which was precisely inspired by the phrase heard during the Reconstruction period. In Spike Lee's words: "We fought for the Union against the Confederacy like we've always fought wars for America, from fighting the British right up to today's war in Iraq. But very few freed slaves got their forty acres and a mule . . . so the name of my company is really a reminder of a broken promise" (Aftab 2; ellipsis marks in the original).

we all get along? - the intricacies of race" and in the chapter where I will provide a more in-depth analysis of Lee's *Blackkklansman* (2018).

My intention, for now, is to reveal how *The Birth of a Nation* (1905) perpetuated a biased historical perspective, told from the point of view of those in power. Ultimately it generated a wrong story that helped to create and shape the myth of the Lost Cause, reinforced social segregation, and was responsible for the rebirth of the Ku Klux Klan, the criminal organization that in the film came to be portrayed as the real heroes, as "the organization that saved the South from the anarchy of black rule" (*The Birth of a Nation* 2:05:27). In the end, rather than a perspective on a distorted history, its main threat lies in the racial divide that painted "whiteness" as superior to "blackness."

Similar narratives have continued to perpetuate the same stereotypes. From films such as *Song of the South* (1946)[5] to Harriet Beecher Stowe's acclaimed book *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, which notwithstanding promoted abolition. By conveying the idea that African American history was marked either by the absence of rebellion, as African Americans were presented as docile and content, or by Blacks who disturbed the peace, these representations shaped a particular and harmful historical perception of African Americans that supported the dominant's culture ideology of violence and oppression, given the gains the community had achieved through Emancipation:

> The literary critic [Addison] Gayle attributes the emergence of this new stereotype in the media and popular culture of blacks as vicious criminals to the need of both southern and northern whites to suppress the expansion of black civil rights and political power developed during the progressive interval of Reconstruction (1867-1877) and the determination to reestablish white supremacist social and political domination over the South (Guerrero 12).

These stereotypes directly impacted on African American lives. African Americans continued to suffer constant violence, both symbolic and physical, ranging from the above-mentioned caricatures to death by lynching. This was celebrated as if it were a party or a reason to register in postcards advertising some region. "Southern trees bear a strange fruit/ Blood on the leaves and blood at the root/ Black bodies swingin' in the Southern breeze," sang Billie Holiday in "Strange Fruit," (Holliday) alluding to lynchings and the dead bodies hanging from trees.

On these stereotypical representations — and recapturing Ridley's indignation with which I began this subchapter, — *Gone with the Wind* (1939), while not displaying so openly the blatant racist

[5] *Song of the South* was an animated movie from 1946, produced by Walt Disney, directed by Harve Foster (photoplay director) and Wilfred Jackson (cartoon director). It was inspired by a collection of stories written by Joel Chandler Harris, under the tittle *Uncle Remus: his songs and his sayings (1880).* The character of Uncle Remus would be immortalized in the film by his cheerful song "Zip-a-dee-doo-dah (...) wonderful feeling, wonderful day", making one believe that despite being a slave, he was happy.

message found in *The Birth of a Nation*, nevertheless continued to repeat old stereotypes about African Americans. Spike Lee will not let it go unnoticed, as I shall also show ahead in this study. Based on a novel by Margaret Mitchell, the film romanticized and perpetuated the myth of the Old South in its portrayal of slavery as something it never was — a peaceful system between the enslaved and their master. This romanticization is explicit from the beginning, in the lines that open the film: "There was a land of Cavaliers and Cotton Fields called the Old South … /Here in this pretty world Gallantry took its last bow ../ Here was the last ever to be seen of Knights and their Ladies Fair of Master and of Slave … /Look for it only in books, for it is no more than a dream remembered" (*Gone with the Wind* 00:6:15 ; ellipsis marks in the original).

In short, both films are quintessential examples of Hollywood mass culture products that followed a conservative ideology of slavery that silenced different voices and perpetuated old power hierarchies. In doing so, they constructed a biased narrative of history laden with symbols and concepts where only a few were included. As such, for example, America[6], the "land of the free," was not synonymous with freedom for its oppressed minorities, including millions of African Americans whose ancestors came to America in chains. In the same vein, certain popular aggregating symbols or phrases suggest the integration of everyone, such as the slogan "one nation under God, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all" dictates. However, the "all" in the Pledge of Allegiance is a rather ambiguous one. When looked at from different perspectives, these same symbols are not representative of freedom or justice; quite the opposite, they can be seen as symbols of tyranny, inequality, and injustice to those who continued to be marginalized within that same U.S. society. As George Lipsitz put it,

> [t]he "heroism" of westward expansion from the settlers' perspective may have seemed like genocide to the Native American Indians. The "progress" of American agriculture and industry might have appeared as naked exploitation to slaves and industrial laborers. The inclusive story about immigrants coming to find freedom in America excludes many blacks, Chicanos, and Native Americans who did not come to America, but instead had America come to them (*Time Passages* 26; quotation marks in the original).

Freedom in the U.S. was granted only to a sector of the U.S. society. A sector built mainly by immigrants from northern Europe, who naturalized themselves as simply "Americans." For many, the

[6] The concept given by the word "America" has generated debates within American studies. According to Kirsten Silva Gruesz, the concept is "troubled from the start by multiple ambiguities about the extent of the territory it delineates, as well as about its deeper connotations" (Gruesz et. all 17). So, America as a concept, if it could ever be defined, is a very imprecise term that goes further than to be related to a continent or the limited territory of the United States or to be about shared values of a people which Gruesz details more deeply (16-22).

reality was the opposite, captivity instead of freedom. From this perspective, the famous American dream was, in the words of Malcolm X, "only the American nightmare":

> I'm one of the 22 million black victims (…) of Americanism. *(…).* I speak as a victim of America's so-called democracy. You and I have never seen democracy — all we've seen is hypocrisy. (…) When we open our eyes today and look around America, we see America not through the eyes of someone who has enjoyed the fruits of Americanism. We see America through the eyes of someone who has been the victim of Americanism. We don't see any American dream. We've experienced only the American nightmare ("The Ballot or the Bullet").

The same division expressed by different ethnonyms in U.S. society, such as African American, Latino American, Asian American, and Native American, presents itself as a dilemma. Even if it seems to honor the different ethnicities in the U.S. society, it is questionable why people of northern European origin have no ethnonym before "American". It makes one believe that everyone else who does not fall into this category deviates from the norm, which whiteness represents. As John Storey aptly puts it,

> Part of the power of whiteness is that it seems to exist outside categories of 'race' and ethnicity. These categories appear to apply only to non-white people; whiteness seems to exist as a human norm from which races and ethnicities are a deviation. This is indeed a privileged position. (…) What makes whiteness so powerful, therefore, is that it is more than the dominant colouring; it operates as an unmarked human norm, and it is against this norm that other ethnicities are invited to measure themselves. Put simply, white people are rarely thought of as white people; they are simply human without ethnicity (*Cultural Theory* 187-188).

Still on this topic, historian Ronald Takaki — whose ancestors were Asian — reflects on the role of 'race' in U.S. society, telling a particular story between himself and a taxi driver who had asked him if he had been in the country long enough. Since his physical appearance did not match the norm of Americanness given by whiteness, he and his family were primarily conceived of as foreigners despite having been in the United States for generations (3). "'Race,' observed Toni Morrison, has functioned as a 'metaphor necessary to the 'construction of Americanness': in the creation of our national identity, 'American' has been defined as 'white.' Not to be 'white' is to be designated as the 'Other"'— different, inferior, and unassimilable" (4; quotation marks in the original).

The idea of American national identity Takaki is referring to has been defined in a single category, directly related to the dominant culture and its power to create and perpetuate a collective memory while distorting and silencing other identities in its favor. In the same vein, narratives like *Gone with the Wind* (1939) need to be deconstructed to understand how a biased perspective has

denied and silenced other American voices and histories. Recognizing this is the first step to understanding the intense contestation when the film was exhibited on HBO and why it was temporarily removed. It is also clear that new and different voices only help to complement a more comprehensive understanding of reality, whether the past or the present, and are as legitimate as the dominant narrative, which a set of mechanisms has supported, including films. On this issue, the African American feminist critic bell hooks stated that the responsibility of mass media, especially those relying on the visual image, is bigger in the "the maintenance of white supremacist patriarchy" and in "the institutionalization via mass media of specific images, representations of race, of blackness that support and maintain the oppression, exploitation, and overall domination of all black people" (*Black Looks* 17).

In the end, the question to be asked is how representations can portray neglected histories. Challenging certain historical narratives, either by completing or questioning their reliability, suggests that the past is not locked in a space capsule but open to contestation and completion through different narratives. However, the task of questioning the established history does not go without conflict, and the struggle occurs essentially between two opposing camps. On the one hand, history is linked to what Lipsitz calls "contract societies," which "with their instrumental and utilitarian philosophies, prevents it from fully airing the continuities of human striving masked by narratives of progress" (*Time Passages* 217). On the other hand, historical memory structures the shared past of a community with its particular narratives of historical events and periods seeking to understand the present by bringing in the missing pieces, usually through processes of popular recollection and meaning making. Recapturing memory is a strategy for African Americans to affirm their identities and move from being a people without history to subjects of history.

This procedure of picking up stories that have been excluded and brought to life by the people's collective memory has been labeled as 'counter-memory'. According to George Lipsitz's definition, this is a "way of remembering and forgetting that starts with the local, the immediate, and the personal" (*Time Passages* 213). 'Counter-memory' is centered on "the particular and the specific" (213) to build an entire story, in contrast to typical historical narratives which tend to be linear and conflictless:

> Counter-memory looks to the past for the hidden histories excluded from dominant narratives. But unlike myths that seek to detach events and actions from the fabric of any larger history, counter-memory forces revision of existing histories by supplying new perspectives about the past. Counter-memory embodies aspects of myth and aspects of history, but it retains an enduring suspicion of both categories. Counter-memory focuses on localized experiences with oppression, using them to reframe and refocus dominant narratives purporting to represent universal experience (213).

Gone with the Wind (1939), used as an example for a broader debate about the role of historical narratives and the importance of questioning them, was supported not only by the master narrative of history but by myth. Myth, so central to typical Hollywood narratives, was used as an innocent discourse, distorting reality and believing the succession of events was naturally bound to happen. (Barthes 128 -130). This naturalization is the main flaw of mythification, simplifying any issue and preventing a deep understanding of it. As in *Gone with the Wind*, the Lost Cause myth was only meant to perpetuate the ideas of a specific ruling class, therefore perpetuating both ancient and current power structures while giving a very simplistic version of reality. Myths are therefore flawed and misleading; whereas history "involves a search for hidden truths and a look beyond surface appearances," it "explores how things came to be" (Lipsitz *Time Passages* 217).

My point in this study is to analyse how Spike Lee's films propose new ways for revisiting history and bringing new voices into the historical landscape that function as a strategy of counter-memory, working between the 'objectivity' of history and the subjectivity of memory. This analysis is interested in seeing how Lee's cinematic representations and the techniques he resorts to, notably the use of footage, can contribute to a better understanding of African American history while allowing the community to construct a more confident and optimistic image of themselves. Moreover, and last but not least, I will reflect upon how Lee's films can challenge the patterns of representation while contributing to a greater awareness on historical and cultural issues that escape mainstream culture.

3.2. Historical accuracy versus historical fiction in Lee's *Malcolm X*

Before delving into the issues presented in the previous paragraph, the long debate between historical fiction and the truthfulness that can be found in historical representations is worth mentioning. Thus, particularly concerning Lee's film *Malcolm X,* which tells the life story of a remarkable historical figure, one may question how much truth and accuracy are depicted.

However, as discussed earlier, if history can be conceived as a partial narrative, its accuracy and veracity can also be questioned; furthermore, it has to be taken into account that film is both an art form, allowing a certain degree of creative freedom, and a popular cultural product that meets the needs of the entertainment industry. Nevertheless, even if it is not an academic work or a history lesson, this art form is crucial for popular culture because, as already mentioned, its accessibility to a wide audience opening up debates on key issues that might otherwise escape mainstream culture.

Lee's *Malcolm X* works with memory, as it revisits a historical figure the dominant historical perception has erased. The film received plenty of criticism, precisely on the issue of historical accuracy. Since Lee was dealing with such a beloved and controversial figure for the U.S. public — particularly for African Americans —, many were concerned about his portrayal. Even though based

on the book *The Autobiography of Malcolm X* (1965), by Malcolm X, "and co-written by screenwriter Arnold Perl, Lee asserted his auteurist primacy over rival interpreters of the life of Malcolm X" (Doherty 29). Lee stated that "Malcolm X [was his] artistic vision" and the "the film [was his] interpretation of the man. It [was] nobody else's" (29).

Representing such an actual and significant figure, particularly for African Americans, was a sensitive issue as it touched on the question of African American identity itself. This identity that was so often forged by historical events such as the Atlantic Trade, Slavery, Jim Crow laws, lynchings, and Segregation, was the cause for displaying and perceiving blackness under these very events and the brutality they generated. Therefore, given a social context that systematically disempowered African Americans, telling a story that could potentially place them as agents of their own stories and history is presented with difficulties. As Maurice E. Stevens stated, to write a self-narrative about a potential African American identity is to keep in mind the images that implied "the devaluation, social infirmity, and inhumanity assigned to African-Americans as people and to 'blackness' as a signifier" (Stevens 278) and to try to contest them. The importance of counter-memory lies precisely here, for it is a task connected with a "discursive act of auto-theorization, and sometimes vindication" (278). Furthermore, and without forgetting the power that visuals play, popular culture, where contestation can occur, provides a space to add new dimensions to African American identity while contesting the previously presented images. On the importance of countermemory for Lee's *Malcolm X*, Stevens states that:

> Countermemory is a form of popular cultural production that provides a space on which the desire for full African-American humanity, full discursive recognition, can be advanced, represented, and ultimately shaped into a viable object of identification (…) Spike Lee's *Malcolm X* functions as a countermemoy-cum-collective social memory that mediates African-American historical trauma, thereby working to define, and in critical ways restrict, the boundaries of "authentic" blackness (278-279).

Lee's film, therefore, had a great responsibility. Not only for being a narrative with the potential to present new possibilities about African American identity, but also as a way to erase specific established negative images. This new, more powerful, and ultimately more human identity could work to inspire new generations, both on the side of the oppressed and the oppressors.

Notwithstanding all the merit that fictional stories may have, the life story of a historical figure can be seen as potentially more influential in the life of any viewer. Knowing that real people broke away from the accepted norm and fought for an equal society is undoubtedly an inspiration for future generations to believe that they too can be a force for change. Therefore, my choice to analyze Spike Lee's *Malcolm X* goes along this very idea.

The film was not the first attempt to portray the iconic figure of Malcolm X. The urge to write a script about him had been waiting for 25 years. Some preeminent African American writers, such as James Baldwin, David Bradley, and Charles Fuller, were hired but soon fired from the project. This difficulty seems to be easily linked to "the industry's intense resistance to a film that would deal with the reality and politics of Malcolm's life" (Guerrero 198). However, if the project was met with such resistance for fear that telling Malcolm X's life could potentially shake the status quo, one can then wonder if any representation could ever be accurate. This very topic about the veracity of representation and how Malcolm X, as a historical figure, would be portrayed on screen is the crux of the matter. As for the question of which Malcolm should be depicted in the film, since he has gone through several changes, Michael E. Dyson questioned which of these changes would "ultimately make the cut?" (130). Would Malcolm X be portrayed as "Malcolm as symbol of racial hatred and violence, Malcolm as black nationalist, Malcolm as newly minted American cultural icon, Malcolm as revolutionary internationalist, Malcolm as weak integrationist, Malcolm as reborn humanist"? (130).

Before Spike Lee, in 1990, Marvin Worth — who had already produced a documentary on the life of Malcolm X in 1972[7] —alongside Warner Brothers, signed in Norman Jewison, a white director, to make the film based on a script by Charles Fuller. However, the choice to use a white director to tell the story of Malcolm X upset Spike Lee, who "was furious that the studio was about to repeat the same error that blighted *Cry Freedom* and *Mississippi Burning* and allow a white director to ruin a black story" (Aftab 104). Finally, it was Spike Lee who 'won the bid' to make the film and release it to a wider audience: "I didn't feel that I was the *only* director qualified to do *Malcolm* X. I just felt that it would be very hard for a white director to get the nuances of the subject. And I still think that it is very few and far between that a white director is able to get it right when they are doing African-American films" (142).

One might conclude that Lee was using the 'race' factor to his advantage; however, the truth is that no controversy seemed to arise from the opposite direction. For example, Steven Spielberg's *The Color Purple* (1985), based on Alice Walker's novel of the same title, did not seem to raise questions from whites about the legitimacy of a white man to portray the story — even if fictional — of black people. Lee's *Malcolm X* had to accept that portraying the life of a man so crucial to African American history was not an easy task, and to that end, the film was not produced without obstacles and criticism. Some of these even came from African Americans, as was the case with Amiri Baraka, an

[7] *Malcolm X,* or *Malcolm X: His Own Story as It Really Happened,* is an American documentary film released on May 24, 1972, in the United States. Directed by Arnold Perl and produced by Mick Benderoth, Arnold Perl, Nancy Reals Perl, and Marvin Worth and distributed by Warner Bros.

African American writer, who stated that "[they would not] let Malcolm X's life be trashed to make middle-class Negroes sleep easier" (Guerrero 198).

Another criticism was linked to the commercialized figure of Malcolm X that Lee was spreading, with the famous *X* logo appearing on a wide range of products. This criticism put Lee in an uncomfortable position, as he was "often (…) perceived in the white media as a hotheaded filmmaker and racial firebrand." (Dyson 131-132). However, now his marketing of Malcolm "became, in the eyes of many, the vehicle for the mass production and dilatation of Malcolm X as an acceptable, easily packaged, even chic commodity that Lee sold in his film and in his 40 Acres and a Mule Shops" (131-132).

Malcolm X was seen as a heroic figure for many African Americans, and everyone had (and has) their own opinion and view of him as a historical figure. Therefore, given this plurality of interpretations, Malcolm X could have been appropriated differently by the collective memory. It is about this plurality of potential representations that Spike Lee wrote and published in an article in *Newsweek* compiled by David Ansen about how his interpretation of the man was his responsibility alone:

> Whose Malcolm is it anyway? Malcolm belongs to everyone and everyone is entitled to their own interpretation. African-Americans as diverse as Supreme Court nominee Clarence Thomas, Minister Louis Farrakhan, Jesse Jackson and Chuck D of Public Enemy all claim him. I reserve my right as an artist to pursue my own vision of the man. (…) Our work is making the best film that can be made to the best of our abilities about the legacy of Malcolm X, and that's all that can be asked of any artist (Lee and Ansen).

Despite the criticism, by bringing a renewed interest in the figure of Malcolm X, the film had a direct impact on popular culture. Namely in the younger African American generations and the new emerging subcultures in the music world, such as rap and hip-hop. According to Todd Boyd, "The resurfacing of Malcolm X as an icon of political resistance can be traced to the growing importance of hip-hop and rap subcultures. (...) Throughout rap's brief history, Public Enemy, KRS-One, and Ice Cube, among others, repeatedly invoked Malcolm and his image in order to reinforce their opposition to American racism" (13). As for the artistic appropriation of the figure, the film can be thought of as part of a strategy to bring essential aspects of Malcolm X's ideas into the spotlight. His contributions regarding concepts and understandings of blackness, national identity, and what it means to be Black in the U.S. society are among them.

3.3. Resisting white hegemony in Lee's *Malcolm X* and other Afro-American narratives

Even if Lee's *Malcolm X* must first be commended for bringing a historical figure erased by the dominant culture into popular culture, its role goes further. The film functions as a counter-hegemonic response to current narratives, which, despite apparent good intentions, have continued (and continue) to perpetuate white hegemony even in predominantly African American narratives. Even though apparently non-existent, since the narrative seems to support the struggle for Black rights, this white dominance can be found in films like Alan Parker's *Mississippi Burning* (1988), Richard Attenborough's *Cry Freedom* (1987), and Richard Pearce's *The Long Walk Home* (1990), whose narratives continue to perpetuate the 'white savior syndrome'. This 'white savior syndrome', is quite harmful to Blacks, as it perpetuates the same notions that Blacks need the help of a White person because they lack the ability, intelligence and will to stand up for themselves. Therefore, these films have only contributed to a selfish sense of self-fulfillment on the part of Whites while also placing Blacks as inferior, less capable, and victims to be pitied. Therefore, at first these narratives do not seem to embrace any controversies, as their plots uphold African American rights. However, white hegemony is still pervasive in these clichés, and history continues to be told, understood, and looked at from a white gaze perspective.

Illustrating this issue, one can mention the Academy Award for Best Picture in 1990 awarded to Bruce Beresford's *Driving Miss Daisy* (1989), which tells the story of an old white Jewish woman who establishes a friendship with her African American driver. The film, relatively light in its depiction of racism, perpetuates a narrative full of stereotypes about African Americans while placing the white figure as the protagonist, thereby contributing nothing to social transformation[8]. For its part, Spike Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (1989) was not even nominated for Best Picture, in the same year. Lee's statement in a 2016 interview when comparing both films is quite understandable: "*Do the Right Thing*, that film is being taught in college, schools all over. No one is watching *Driving Miss Daisy* now. So, it also shows you that the work is what's important because that's the stuff that's gonna stand for years, not an award" (Lee "Spike Lee sounds").

While certain narratives, such as *Gone with the Wind,* may be grossly racist, given not only their message but also the roles assigned to African American actors, it can be far more challenging to understand how white hegemony extends more subtly to other types of narratives, such as those

[8] It is rather ironic that 30 years later, Peter Farrelly's *Green Book* (2018) — whose plot revolves around an unlikely friendship between a famous Black pianist who needs a white bodyguard to travel with him through the segregationist U.S. South — won the Academy Award for Best Picture in 2019. To which Spike Lee reacted by saying "every time someone's driving somebody I loose, but they changed the seating arrangement" (Lee "Spike Lee Calls" 00:00:20), later saying that the Award given to *Green Book* was "a bad call" (Lee "Spike Lee Calls" 00:1:34). Suggesting not only how the narrative remained the same as 30 years earlier, having only changed the "seating arrangement" — the driver being White and the passenger Black, where in *Driving Miss Daisy* it was the opposite — but also how the Academy made a mistake by not giving an Oscar to *Do the Right Thing* and giving it instead to *Driving Miss Daisy* instead.

mentioned above. Therefore, part of the desire of African American directors is to create alternative narratives that can show history on their terms while fighting and resisting this white dominance over their stories. In the scope of this challenge, new narratives create new historical perspectives while assigning more humanizing roles to African American actors, who can then appropriately play their historical figures.

This battle has been a constant in popular culture. Thus, the controversy in 2020 over the HBO screening of *Gone with the Wind* was not entirely unprecedented. For many years, as argued, the Hollywood industry assigned derogatory roles to African Americans, including, obviously, in previous versions of the same novel and film. Since its release, African Americans have regarded the film as an "inventory of negative stereotypes and a 35mm projection of white power" (Doherty 29). Among them, Malcolm X, in his *Autobiography*, tells a specific story of his childhood and his reaction to seeing the film. Projected into a movie theater in Mason, Michigan, Malcolm "was the only negro in the theater" who felt ashamed, "like crawling under the rug" when "Butterfly McQueen[9] went into her act" (X. *The Autobiography* 113). Spike Lee's *Malcolm X* is presented as an alternative myth not only against the old ones portrayed by 'white Hollywood,' but as an alternative and a positive example to the old representations that disseminated the image of Blacks as mere victims or objects of the white agency. Lee's *Malcolm X* presents itself as a new narrative showing that African Americans can react defiantly, not just peacefully, as typically presented.

Indeed, Lee's *Malcolm X*, along with the original text, *Autobiography,* according to Kristen Hoerl, "reflect[s] efforts to provide a more nuanced and sympathetic understanding of the radical black leader" (5) who has been commonly seen as an angry radical. In contrast, it is relevant to note that history has, in turn, eternalized the figure of Martin Luther King, Jr., and has celebrated his legacy, as well as the civil rights movement, in the form of an American holiday since 1983. The projection in history and popular culture that King achieved — and that Malcolm X, in comparison, did not — is explained insofar as King resorted mainly to a project of non-violence and integration that unified Blacks and Whites under the belief that they could work together towards a perfect society. King's dream was, in his own words, "a dream deeply rooted in the American dream," a dream that "must not lead us to distrust all white people" (M. King). This same philosophy best matched the American national narrative of progress as a perfect union among its citizens. Contrarily, Malcolm X's philosophy of black nationalism, appealing to the African American's individual right to self-defense and the

[9] Butterfly McQueen was the actress who played Prissy, a Black character portrayed as silly, in *Gone with the Wind.*

separation between Blacks and Whites, presented itself as a more significant threat to the American social order.

Malcolm X's philosophy and the reasons for his revolt are then presented to the film's audience, who can— if they are willing — finally understand the reasons for both his and the general discontent of African Americans. These two different approaches to reach equality in U.S. society — reacting either peacefully or with violence — are also presented in Lee's *Do the Right Thing* (1989): in Radio Raheem's rings, where one reads *LOVE* and the other reads *HATE*. The latter is understood as Malcolm X's call for disobedience, contrasting with the *love* advocated by Reverend Martin Luther King Jr.

Although this contrast can be pointed out as a flaw in Lee's *Malcolm X*, this juxtaposition of Martin Luther King, Jr. as a passive protester and Malcolm X as a figure who called for disobedience and self-defense is, according to Manning Marable, a "serious weakness in Lee's film" and "nothing could be further from the truth" (p 9). This approach gave viewers "the distinct impression that King was an accommodating leader, seeking to reconcile black demands within the framework of white power and privilege" (p 9). Marable goes on to argue that "simply because Martin failed to match Malcolm X's fiery language and style or refused to depart from nonviolence as a means of public protest and civil disobedience, doesn't make him an 'Uncle Tom'" (p 9).

Nevertheless, Spike Lee's *Malcolm X* is profoundly influential in popular culture. Bringing the figure of Malcolm X to the big screen is a contribution to reflection on his importance and how African Americans see themselves, with the film adding to a better self-esteem. At the same time, their identities and history are projected to broader audiences in a new and more optimistic perspective. Alongside this, another message of the film is the recognition that no rights are taken for granted, and issues such as racism and white supremacy are not locked in the past but continue, unfortunately, to be a part of the present.

3.4. Spike Lee presents Malcolm X and his American nightmare

If the "I have a dream" speech immortalized Martin Luther King, Malcolm X presented a wildly divergent idea with his "American nightmare". The two philosophies of the two leaders continue to be presented by Spike Lee as two opposing forces yet aimed at the same goal. Particularly, in Lee's *Malcolm X*, it appears right at the opening of the film, with the image of the U.S. flag juxtaposed with Denzel Washington's voice perfectly mimicking that of the real Malcolm X. As the U.S. flag burns, one can hear Malcolm X's words stating that African Americans have been nothing more than "the victim of America" (Lee *Malcolm X* 00:01:37). At the same time, as the flag slowly burns until it shows an X behind its stripes and stars, the image is intercut with actual footage of the 1992 beatings of Rodney King, in Los Angeles, at the hands of the police. Finally burning the flag, the 'X' reveals the

silenced history behind appearances, while the words of Malcolm X's character attest to how African Americans were deprived of the American dream and had instead "only experienced the American nightmare" (Lee *Malcolm X* 00:02:29). In Gerald Horne's words,

> With his usual audacity, Spike Lee has dared to create a competing myth (…). Malcolm X presents angry, not meek blacks. It suggests that Jim Crow violence and exploitation were eroded not only by smart lawyers and adroit FBI agents but by angry black Muslims and nationalists as well. In this alternative view, the nonviolence and passive resistance of Dr. King is juxtaposed with Malcolm X's language of militant self-defense (441).

Malcolm X is presented as a figure who embodies the characteristics of the American dream himself. A dream that is realized through his transformation and the obstacles he faced to achieve recognition. From his childhood, as Malcolm Little, to the criminal Detroit Red, to the African American nationalist Malcolm X, finally ending up as El-Hajj Malik El-Shabazz. However, even if framed under this American dream, the film soon clarifies why he and his community did not experience it but have instead experienced its opposite.

Malcolm X has also been Malcolm Little, a boy who was a victim of racial violence from the beginning when his mother was pregnant with him, and a group of Klansmen attacked his home. In a scene reminiscent of D.W. Griffith's *The Birth of a Nation* (1915), the group of Klansmen rode off into the moonlight after smashing the windows of his house. Also significant is the scene that follows, where the viewer learns about Malcolm Little's father. The description says that his father "was not a frightened Negro" but "a strong man" (Lee *Malcolm X* 00:08:47-00:08:43), who fearlessly defied the Ku Klux Klan after the group burned down his house. Here, as he shouts, "I'm not a boy, I'm a man" (Lee 00:49:09), he not only asserts his masculinity but inverts the stereotype given by the word "boy," usually attributed to emasculated Black men.

Furthermore, the scene openly reverses the roles of the heroes. Here, the hero and "a real man [is the one] who don't hide behind no bedsheets" (Lee *Malcolm X* 00:49:12), as opposed to the Klan members who fled after Malcolm's father fired shotguns. Consequently, for this act, which was represented as nothing more than self-defense, he is later murdered by the Ku Klux Klan. His murder and death — which were ruled a suicide — led to the entire family being divided across the country.

Malcolm Little is a boy separated from his mother and siblings and attended a school where he is the only black boy. White hegemony is evident here as the boy's consent to the word "nigger" attributed to him illustrates internalized racism. In one scene, the narration says, "I was called nigger so much I didn't think there was anything wrong with it. I thought it was my name" (Lee *Malcolm X* 00:24:39- 00:24:44). In another scene, reminiscent of Ralph Ellison's 1952 novel *Invisible*

Man, Malcolm Little notes that "they talked about me like I wasn't there, like I was a pedigreed dog or a horse…like I was invisible" (Lee 00:24:45-00:24:52). Recalling the opening lines of Ellison's novel, "I am an invisible man. (…) I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me" (3).

This invisible boy is also one whose dreams and aspirations are immediately suppressed by his schoolteacher, who tells him that "a lawyer is no realistic goal for a nigger", advising him to become something he can be instead, a carpenter, because he is "good with his hands" and that would be "a good profession for a colored" (Lee *Malcolm X* 00:25:04 – 00:25:30). In another scene, Malcolm X's character narrates, "Until that time, there were three things I was always afraid of: a job, a bust, and jail" (Lee *Malcolm X* 00:50:34 – 00:50: 45).

Offering limited opportunities for African Americans in society, this social order led Malcolm X into the criminal world. From Malcolm Little to 'Detroit Red,' he becomes a street hustler and a criminal in this second transformation. This period of his life, which will later lead him to prison, is still a time when white hegemony continues to take over his own life without him recognizing it. This hegemony can best be grasped under Antonio Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony. More than the physical force of a particular state, the ideology of a specific bloc can be transmitted as common sense and consented to in society through some mechanisms of an 'ethical state,' such as formal institutions, schools, family, and others (Barker and Jane 602). Transmitted as natural, ideology seems unquestionable since there would never be alternatives available (603). In this same sense, given the white dominance in U.S. society, even African Americans would agree and consent to the reality presented, being unimaginable that any other social order could ever be possible, from employment opportunities to the very concept of beauty, which was also ruled as white.

With Malcolm getting a 'konk job,' the scenes around hair straightening represent how the concept of beauty is related to Caucasian aesthetics. Consent is so significant that even Black people try to imitate a white person's hairstyle. More troubling is how blackness is presented to African Americans who meticulously submit to the above-mentioned beauty standards. "Looks white, don't it?" (Lee *Malcolm X* 00:07:04), asks Malcolm Little. Here, Spike Lee brilliantly examines racial issues and how white hegemony works in the very minds of African Americans who continued to construct a self-negative perception while submitting to the standards of beauty of the dominant culture [10].

[10] On this note, there have been several attempts to reverse this negative image, as the "Black is Beautiful" movement. In the same vein and quite recently, Beyonce's 2016 song, "Formation", stands for the recognition and pride of Black beauty while contesting white standards of beauty. However, it is also questionable why she continues to perform with her hair dyed blonde, something that bell hooks affirms to be internalized racism in a white supremacist world, and thus a way to obtain wealth while maintaining the standards of whiteness (*Black Looks* 11-13).

The four 'konk job' scenes in Lee's *Malcolm X* illustrate this idea of internalized racism by a Black person. This dilemma between blackness or whiteness and how both categories are defined is discussed in the film. Not only through the description of Malcolm's mother, who was "fair-skinned because a white man raped her mother," a fact that made her "hate her complexion" and "the white blood in her body" (Lee *Malcolm X* 00:09:30-00:09:38), but also about the black men's negative perception of black women, whom white men have raped throughout history. Consequently, the white woman was presented as the black man's object of desire. Sophia, the white woman Malcolm falls in love with, seems to be nothing more than his denial of his skin color. In one scene "Sophia, attempts to feed him breakfast. His eyes narrow, and he berates her, accusing her of wanting to destroy him. It is as though he realizes that his desire for Sophia, for her whiteness, is destroying him, but, without any means of understanding why, he can only lash out" (Jones). Sophia is the leading cause of his prison sentence and the end of the 'Detroit Red.' "Our crime wasn't burglary," reflects the character of Malcolm X "it was sleeping with white girls" (Lee *Malcolm X* 00:59:32).

In prison, 'Detroit Red' will grow his self-awareness and a more expansive perception of the whole African American experience in the U.S. There, he meets Baines (Albert Hall), who will introduce him to the words of Elijah Muhammad (Al Freeman) and which will make him convert to the Nation of Islam. The first interaction between the two men is when Malcolm is wrapped around a towel in the prison shower, ready to straighten his hair once more. This meaningful scene makes Malcolm realize how white hegemony had influenced his life and that of his people, and the dialogue that follows is representative of this:

> Baines: That's what the white man wants you to do. Look at you, putting all that poison in your hair.
> Malcolm X: I think you been in prison too long, my man, because everybody on the outside conks.
> Baines: Why? Why does everybody on the outside conk?
> Malcolm X: Because they don't want to walk around with a nappy head, looking like...
> Baines: Looking like what? Like me? Like a nigger? Why don't you wanna look like what you are? What makes you ashamed of being black? (…)
> Baines: Go on. Burn yourself. Pain yourself. Put all that poison in your hair, in your body, trying to be white! (Lee *Malcolm X* 01:06:39-01:07:21).

Another interesting scene is when Baines mentions that "God is Black," meeting with an incredulous Malcolm who responds by saying that "everybody knows God is white" (Lee *Malcolm X* 01:11:00- 01:11:04). This same idea is also found later in the prison church when Malcolm, already more educated and self-aware, questions the Christian priest about Jesus's skin color. In turn, Baines

educates Malcolm, and Lee educates the viewers about his history, heritage, African American identity, and how difficult it was to assert it. This heritage, which is crucial to asserting their identity, is successfully grasped in the lines from the film that follow:

> Baines: When that grafted, blue-eyed devil locked us in chains, one hundred million of us, broke up our families, tortured us, cut us off from our language, our religion, our history. Let me tell you about black history. We are the original man. The first men on earth were black. They ruled. And there wasn't a white face anywhere. But they teach us that we lived in caves and swung from trees. That's a lie! Black men never did that. We were a race of kings when the white man crawled on all fours over the hills in Europe. Do they know who they are? Do you know where you came from? (Lee *Malcolm X* 01:15:21).

Baines also asks Malcolm's real name and, in doing so, he questions Malcolm's identity. Malcolm responds by saying, "Look, l ain't - shit. All right, l ain't Malcolm Little. I ain't Red. (...) I don't know." (Lee *Malcolm X* 01:16:22 – 01:16:37). However, the tensest scene during the depiction of Malcolm's time in prison is perhaps the one in which Baines pushes Malcolm to look up the definition of the word 'black' in *Webster's Dictionary.*

This scene is crucial to understanding how language functions as an ally to the oppressive system in which African Americans have lived. It is through language that a person constructs his or her sense of the world. This understanding, however, is not immobile nor isolated from the outside. Instead, it directly impacts how a specific society is structured and how its members interact with each other. According to Stuart Hall, language is crucial in creating the meanings of one's culture because it functions as a representational system that allows the participants of a particular culture to construct shared meanings among them (*Representation* xvii). In short, everything lacks meaning until it is given by a human mind, so meaning is part of the very process of representation (xix – xxi).

Words, then, can be thought of as mere signs that carry no meaning in themselves. The word '*black'* is just a construct of five letters put together, its real meaning being assigned only by language, which is directly intertwined with culture and vice versa. If this is so, what needs to be asked is where this meaning comes from, and which culture assigned it. In Lee's *Malcolm X*, Baines opens the dictionary searching for the definition for the word 'black.' This scene shows the viewer how its meaning has been constructed over time by the oppressor's language. Whatever the meaning of 'black' or 'blackness' is, the viewer recognizes that a system of racialized representation has constructed its meaning in the scene. Moreover, this same system has created meaning by establishing a difference between opposing concepts, one sign being conceivable as the norm and any other as its hostile opposition, replete with stereotypes.

Spike Lee is precisely asking the viewer's attention to consider this, zooming in on the camera for the words that define 'black.' One conclusion is that its meaning has been constructed by an unfair, racialized game of stereotypes and defined as more negative and inhuman when contrasted with the word 'white', proving that the concept of 'race' is nothing but a mere social construction, which will be explained in detail later:

> Baines: Black: Destitute of light, devoid of color. Enveloped in darkness, hence, utterly dismal or gloomy as, 'The future looked black.' (…) Soiled with dirt. Foul. Sullen. Hostile. Forbidding, as, 'a black day.' Foully or outrageously wicked as, 'black cruelty.' indicating disgrace, dishonor or culpability. And there's others. Blackmail. Blackball. Blackguard. (…) Let's look up 'white.' Here. Read.
>
> Malcolm X: White: The color of pure snow. Reflecting all the rays of the spectrum. The opposite of black. Free from spot or blemish. Innocent? Pure. Huh? Ain't this something? Without evil intent. Harmless. Honest, square-dealing, and honorable. Wait a minute. This - this - this is written by white folks, though, right? This is a white folks book?
>
> Baines: This sure ain't no black man's book (Lee *Malcolm X* 01:11:32 – 01:13:00).

This education in prison will cause 'Detroit Red' to become Malcolm X. The X represents his unknown past heritage, setting him apart from the names that masters assign to enslaved people. It is also here that he will enter the Nation of Islam through the teachings of Elijah Muhamad. The very joining of Islam seems to be a political statement against the hypocrisy of typical Christian America, which continued to oppress African Americans, a Christianity that has been embraced by the K.K.K. and has been the cause of so many lynchings inflicted on African Americans. One can understand thus why Malcolm X tries to convince some of his people to renounce their Christianity: "Malcolm x: Now you're in this church every day, praying to this God. But I'm telling you, these so-called white Christians they're hanging our black Christians from trees brother. This is the man that hates you. He tells you he loves you, but he doesn't do anything for you" (Lee *Malcolm X* 01:29:40).

The desire for an independent nation linked to Black nationalism gained new support with the Black Muslim Movement. Elijah Muhammad, the leader of the Nation of Islam, founded in 1930 in Detroit, claimed, among other statements, that the Black man was the "original man" and Islam, his religion. Christianity, in turn, was the white man's religion and existed only to make black people subservient. In addition, the Nation of Islam and its ideology of black nationalism linked to the Black Power movement aimed to create a renewed African American identity that would move away from the derogatory characteristics that dominant white America had forged. One of its main goals was to be separated from white America and create a nation within North America that would develop a distinct culture.

According to George M. Fredrickson, far from profiting "from the achievement of the civil rights movement's goal of ending legal segregation in the southern states" (288), the Nation performed mainly in urban settings, rescuing converts mostly from urban ghettos. Spike Lee transports the audience to this setting, which can be seen in Malcolm X's transformation. From his criminal adolescence to his period as a black nationalist, he moves predominantly between urban locations. According to Fredrickson, the Nation of Islam "created a separate world for its converts that isolated and protected them from the pain of confronting the world outside" (288). The Nation also attracted mainly "lower-class urban blacks" as it "offered relief from poverty, desperation, painful feelings of worthlessness or inferiority, and the physical dangers of drug addiction or criminality" (288), something that is seen in the film in Malcolm's own story and his joining the Nation while in prison. However, to belong to the Nation, one had to endure changes related to the need to assert a new, more respectable African American identity.

As such, the construction of Malcolm X's new identity begins the moment he takes an oath not to "touch the white man's poison, his drugs, his liquor, his swine, his women" (Lee *Malcolm X* 01:17:57). At the same time, a Muslim should be "strikingly upright, an outstanding example" (Lee *Malcolm X* 01:18:07). In short, behave in an exemplary manner that could erase and contrast the negative stereotypes associated with African Americans. This positive identity is represented by Malcolm's new conduct and the changing patterns of his clothing, from the zoot suits he once wore to the more formal black suits he wore as a spokesman for the Nation of Islam.

Indeed, suits seem to play a critical role in the Nation of Islam for both men and women. Their robes, which Lee displays in the film, are a mark that makes it clear to the viewer that s/he is in the presence of a distinctive culture. Furthermore, by representing an alternative religion to Christianity, Lee proposes an alternative identity to African Americans, who have usually been linked to their Christian gospel chants.

This more assertive identity is also introduced by the images shown about the Nation of Islam members and their organization, notably represented in the scene after the beating of Brother Johnson by the police. In this scene, organized militants march like a disciplined army toward the hospital where Brother Johnson had been taken. It is this demonstration of power that makes a white policeman say that "that's too much power for one man to have" (Lee *Malcolm X* 01:48:52).

One of the most illustrative speeches that assert his power, by speaking aloud about the violence inflicted on African Americans, is when Malcolm X's character states that "the black people in this country have been the victims of violence at the hands of the American right-wing for 400 years" (Lee *Malcolm X* 02:00:33). The speech continues by reminiscing about the violence of the Ku Klux Klan

and comparing it to the brutality that African Americans suffer at the hands of the police. This violence is illustrated in the following words spoken by Malcolm X's character, who then states that "a hundred years ago, they used to put on white sheets and sic bloodhounds on us. Well, nowadays, they've traded in the sheets (..) they've traded in those white sheets for police uniforms. They traded in the bloodhounds for police dogs" (Lee *Malcolm X* 02:01:00).

The power of the visual and the film itself appears even stronger here, as it combines Malcolm's ideals with actual images of historical events illustrative of that same discourse. As he speaks these words, Denzel Washington's performance is interspersed with actual footage showing police officers both using vicious dogs to attack African Americans, hitting them with sticks, or using water cannons against them. The use of actual footage validates the narrative presented so far and connects audiences with history. On the use of footage to balance historical record as it has been represented in mainstream culture and Hollywood films most often than not, it is worth reading what Lee says about the deliberate use of this filmic technique in his films:

> A lot of people have forgotten, or don't know, that I'm also a documentary filmmaker. And as I moved along in my path as a filmmaker, I started using more things that you might say come from documentary: archival footage, archival photos. The opening credits of *Malcolm X* feature the brutal beating of Rodney King by the police. More recently, at the end of *Blackkklansman*, we go from the narrative to Charlottesville, Virginia, that hate march. So, what we did, what we've done, in *Da 5 Bloods* is not something new. And I just think that it's another example of what a Spike Lee Joint is. It's not one thing. It's a mixture (Lee "Spike Lee's inspirations" 4:15 – 5:08*)*.

By showing the audience the real people and events that sustain the film's narrative, the director transports the film's characters into the real world of which the audience is a part. This connection to reality also serves as a resource to create greater empathy and awareness on the viewer's part and is a current technique in Lee's films.

In *Malcolm X*, other footage also portrays the horrors of the lynching of African Americans while showing a recording of Martin Luther King and his call for non-violence. The comparison of both leaders appears again when Malcolm X refers to "Uncle Tom negro leaders" who preach that "we ought to integrate with an enemy who bombs us, who kills and shoots us, who lynches us, who rapes our women and children," arguing in the end that "that's not intelligent!" (Lee *Malcolm X* 02:01:50).

Malcolm X's break with the Nation of Islam is portrayed in the film as well. First, in a scene where Malcolm X's wife alerts him to a newspaper article where two women accuse Elijah Muhammad of impregnating them. Here, Lee chooses the character of Malcolm X to refer to that same newspaper

as belonging to the "white devil," even though a more radical part of him has been tried to hide it. In the film, an incredulous Malcolm X eventually gives in when confronted with the visit of two women who tell him about their involvement with Elijah Muhammad and ask for help in raising their children. Second, this definitive break came after Malcolm's comments about the J.F.K. assassination. In the film, in a scene framed in black and white, Lee documents the famous phrase Malcolm X professed about the President's murder, that this was nothing more than "the chickens coming home to roost" (Lee *Malcolm X* 02:27:05). Indicating that the assassination of J.F.K. was nothing but a response to all the oppression that Whites had established upon minorities, and that was now being reflected even on the President of the U.S., who had also been a victim of the racialized society that killed not only Black but also White people.

This statement, which did not please Elijah Muhammad, earned Malcolm X a silent rebuke, which Malcolm X accepted, and Lee portrayed it in the film. This statement would also mark Malcolm's final break with the Nation of Islam and his coming transformation and adherence to a less radicalized philosophy. To represent a person as complex as Malcolm X is a challenge since he kept changing throughout his life until his death. From Malcolm Little to Detroit Red, Malcolm X and his revolutionary black nationalism, and the final break with the Nation of Islam when he becomes Al-Hajj Malik Al-Shabazz. Had he not been assassinated, surely the world would have continued to witness his evolution and continued contributions in terms of addressing Black affirmation and in the fight against racial injustice.

The most exciting aspect of his pilgrimage to Mecca is the contact with another reality, where he recognizes that the 'race' factor does not seem to be as relevant as in the U.S. In Mecca, Malcolm meets people who live and pray together, regardless of the color of their skin. This confrontation with a different way of life seems to put him in a new perspective, not only on U.S. reality but also on the very ideology he had preached until then. As Jeffrey S. Febus stated, Malcolm X realizes this to be a doctrine that had stuck all white people as the "white devil," and which, among other slurs, said that the 'white race' had been the invention of a mad scientist named "Yacub, known as 'the big head scientist," who "went 'mad' and rebelled against the creator" (70).

Brilliantly, the film's viewer senses that something is about to happen by Lee's typical dolly shot. By achieving smooth movements, this technique creates a cinematic effect that adds more depth to the scene. Here the camera frames the worried face of Malcolm X's character, who, like a ghost, floats aimlessly down the street as he makes his way to the auditorium where he will give his speech and be assassinated. Sam Cooke's song "A change is gonna come" accompanies the images and foreshadows his imminent death.

After the assassination, the story of Malcolm X persists through time in the form of a legacy. Parts of Ossie Davis' eulogy for Malcolm X, preached at Faith Temple Church of God in New York City on February 27, 1965, are heard in the film's last few minutes. Along with some actual footage of Malcolm X showing parts of his life that Lee could not portray in the film, such as the friendship between Malcolm X and Muhammad Ali. Again, portraying a man's life and adapting it into a film, with a limit of time, is a very demanding task, and it would be nearly impossible to portray every little aspect of it. Still, by mixing footage of events that he did not portray in the film, Lee seems to redeem himself from any of the film's shortcomings.

Regarding Malcolm's legacy, the film evinces that his influence extends beyond U.S. borders, as images of Soweto in South Africa remind the audience of the Apartheid system in that country. The images of young children shouting his name at the end and identifying with him: "I am Malcolm X" (Lee *Malcolm X* 03:11:18) indicate that the work Malcolm began endures in each of them while simultaneously being a way for Lee to engage young African Americans with a hero figure who can represent them positively. In addition, the appearance of Nelson Mandela in the film's last minutes bridges the tradition of a world renown Black preacher as if almost embodying the very figure of Malcolm X and his ideals. If this ending may not be a classic by Hollywood standards, it is what makes it groundbreaking.

3.5. Conclusion

Representation raises questions of exclusion and inclusion, that relate to questions of power. Who has the power to exclude or include subjects in representations? The struggle and challenge of new types of representation are, then, to allow everyone to have a place, a voice, an example they can look at and feel inspired to act in real life. It gives young people – who usually seek an identity in popular culture representations– the chance to engage with a specific character and feel their identity positively validated. If misrepresentation leads to stereotypes about minorities and ensuing prejudices, positive representation breaks down those stereotypes, the way certain people look at a particular minority, and how those minorities see themselves represented on screen. If life imitates art, then positive representation, including everyone and giving them a humanizing role, contributes to a better society where everyone feels their identities validated.

Following the previous idea on representation, some flaws may be highlighted in Lee's *Malcolm X,* which failed to depict certain aspects of Malcolm's life and could have made a difference in seeing the African American leader through a different lens. As illustrative of this, and according to Herb Boyd, Malcolm's trip to Mecca was richer in content than the film portrayed, since Malcolm met revolutionary African leaders such as the "Egyptian President Gamal Abdal Nasser, or any of the other

African leaders he met during two extensive trips across the continent" (11). He states that if these representations had been portrayed in the film, "it would have dramatized the connection between Africa and Africans in the Diaspora, and Malcolm's increasing potential as a world leader" (11). In the same vein, the film's omission of the friendship between Malcolm X and Muhammad Ali could have potentially connected two beloved figures by the African American community. In addition, it could have touched the sports world and attracted more African Americans towards a living figure who was still alive at the time of the film's release.

While some reviews are indispensable, they do not recognize how innovative the film was. It must first be acknowledged that typical Hollywood standards would not depict the story of an African American leader, making it a pioneer in its genre. For this very reason, it would subsequently influence the creation of other films that introduced African American historical figures who were not commonly mentioned in popular culture. As examples of these influence are later films such as Steve McQueen's *12 Years a Slave* (2013), which tells the story of Solomon Northup; Kasi Lemmons' *Harriet* (2019) about Harriet Tubman's life; or yet Nate Parker's *The Birth of a Nation* (2016) an ironic title that plays with the title of Griffith's classic, which looks back at the story of enslaved Nat Turner and his rebellion in 1831, in Virginia.

The extensive commercialization of the figure of Malcolm X has also been criticized. However, as argued, popular culture is not without a certain commercial purpose, as it needs these mechanisms to bring its ideas to a broader audience. By reintroducing the figure of Malcolm X, Lee not only reintroduced the discussion about racism in U.S. society but also brought back a mythical figure capable of generating positive images about and for African Americans.

This agitation in popular culture aligns with the goal of a counter-memory narrative. It is not intended to be a history lesson since the film, as a product for entertainment, cannot be viewed as such. In turn, recapturing narratives neglected by mainstream popular culture opens an opportunity to raise awareness about different social and historical backgrounds. Lee's *Malcolm X* is simultaneously a counter-memory that revisits the pre-Civil Rights movement period based on "traditional myth (…) centered on Martin Luther King Jr, with Rosa Parks and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) playing pivotal supporting roles" (Horne 440). What Lee's *Malcolm X* is doing is challenging this ancient mythology. Not only by portraying a figure of great relevance to African Americans but simultaneously creating new and alternative representations of other ideologies of resistance.

To me, Lee's target audience should go further than the African American community, reaching out to one that would not typically be his audience. To claim that his films are made only for a particular

audience would be a very reductive statement. While the films are crucial to asserting and giving possibilities of choice to a more positive African American identity, they are essential for discussing relevant themes within the forum of popular culture, thus proving its power. As Jacquie Jones stated, popular culture "provides common identities and tangible links, primarily for young people, to universes beyond the family, the neighborhood, or the classroom" (Jones 10). Still, according to Jones, what may be the most important about Lee's *Malcolm X* is that:

> It does something that is rarely done well, and even then most often in fictions like Richard Wright's *Native Son* or Toni Morrison's *Beloved*: it details the tragic and profound effects of racism on the construction of the African American self-image, and the equally unfortunate repercussions the resulting absence of self-esteem can have on society as a whole. Not in the abstract way that we understand that slavery has a correlation to black on black violence, but in the precise way the experience of every African-American has been shaped in some way by a school system, a social service network, a government, and a media that teaches black children self-hate (10).

As for Malcolm X himself, Jones states that his figure has always meant "something singular, though often unspoken, for black people, something that cannot be expressed by any other figure in our history" (10). This quote just proves how influential Malcolm X was for the Black community, especially when it came to knowing their history, learning how to defend and protect themselves, and ultimately asserting a new and more powerful identity.

4. Black man infiltrates Ku Klux Klan"[11]- race, white supremacy, and identity in Lee's *Blackkklansman*

4.1. "Can we all get along?"[12]- the intricacies of race

The infamous beating of Rodney King on March 3, 1991, at the hands of four L.A. police officers, recorded on tape by George Holliday, was the first viral video in the United States to expose racial violence by the police. The footage itself was proof enough of the excessive violence being used against a defenseless African American man. Nevertheless, more famous than the video was the verdict of the police officers, which acquitted all four officers of assault and three of them for using excessive violence. This decision resulted in inflamed reactions from the public, who took the streets in protest in what turned out to be one of the most violent riots in American history. Due to the enormous public pressure, the police officers were called for a second trial and sentenced to two and a half years in prison.

Unfortunately, Rodney King's case would only become the first of several videotaped cases to confirm police brutality against Black people. The brutality of the police beatings against Rodney King, who did not offer any resistance, attested to how racism was prevalent in social relations in the United States in the 1990s and questioned the role of the very system of police enforcement. Despite the Civil Rights Movements in the 1960s, granting African Americans full citizenship rights, the laws were not fully practiced in everyday life, even if written down. In addition, the judicial system itself was still enormously flawed, as the police, or even private vigilantes — as in the case of Trayvon Martin's murder — continued to be acquitted of the use of extreme violence in many cases leading to the death of mainly Black people. Illustrative of this is Alicia Garza's[13] testimony about George Zimmerman's verdict that acquitted him of the murder of Trayvon Martin in 2013: "I cried for us. All of us. I cried for who we are, who America is (…) that we would make laws that justified being fearful of Black people, laws that allowed you to kill Black people and not face any consequences" (117-118).

These cases must not be thought of as isolated but as part of a more extensive system that normalized them. What should be highlighted here is that Rodney King's case and others proved how much the 'race' factor played a crucial role both in his beating and in the clearing of the guilty. Therefore, if 'race' is the cause of injustice and discrimination that sometimes leads to the

[11] This was Jordan Peele's famous pitch line when he called Spike Lee with the idea of a new film. Spike Lee referred to it in several interviews. Namely on "The Tonight Show", starring Jimmy Fallon when he was asked where he had come up with the title for the film (Lee "Spike Lee on How")

[12] This is a quote from Rodney King himself after he had appealed to the public to stop rioting after the trial that acquitted all officers of assault. (R. King, 0:58)

[13] Alicia Garza is the co-creator of Black Lives Matter, which started first as a hashtag on Twitter in 2013, became an organization in 2014, and has been ever since a movement compared by some to the 1960s Civil Rights.

indiscriminate murder of people, it is imperative to understand its significance in everyday interactions and why it needs to be analyzed.

Despite the achievements of the Civil Rights Movement, the ongoing violence that black people have continued to face questioned that legacy and how much the system needed reform and development. Even though the 1960s movement was revolutionary in legally ending racial segregation and recognizing the civil rights of African Americans, it quickly began to fade since Black people continued to suffer discrimination. As relevant as Martin Luther King's dream was to "live in a nation where [his children would] not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character" (M. King), his dream could not be seen as fulfilling in African Americans' everyday life. In turn, and ironically, King's ideals have been later appropriated by political conservatives who wish to deny the existence of 'race' as the root of the problem in U.S. social interactions.

Furthermore, on the issue of 'race,' the 2008 election of Barack Obama, the first African American president of the United States, provided yet another argument for talking about a post-racial/post-black society in the United States. The post-blackness argument defended that the United States had become a place where 'race' no longer seemed to be an obstacle to achieving what one wanted, including the presidency, and that the racist burden of the past and the discrimination associated with Blacks was over. Moreover, the fact that famous Blacks like Oprah or Beyonce had achieved recognition, despite the color of their skin, seemed to be a clear sign that 'race' was not a factor in denying success (Barker and Jane 325).

However, this argument is tremendously fallacious, and several ideas can debunk it. First, recent events in U.S. history show that U.S. society is far from getting rid of structural racism. On the one hand, the election of Donald Trump to the presidency in 2016 resurrected and legitimized a solid right-wing movement and, with it, a shamelessly racist and anti-immigration attitude. On the other hand, the serial murders of black people at the hands of the police, among them the infamous deaths of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, prove that black people remain the primary target of police brutality. Secondly, the experiences of famous black artists do not speak for the entire African American experience; thirdly, the election of Barack Obama did not by itself change racism in society since black lives continued to be targets of discrimination. These are some of the aspects, however superficial, that can refute the idea of a post-racial U.S. society.

Additionally, about Obama himself, despite the color of his skin, he has always kept one foot back when it comes to criminal injustice directed against Blacks. In the case of Trayvon Martin in particular, many Blacks were outraged by his response and the way he handled the case, adopting a more right-wing discourse, calling for a change in Blacks and not the system itself. Obama claimed that

"African American young men are disproportionately involved in the criminal justice system; that they're disproportionately both victims and perpetrators of violence" ,and that "somebody like Trayvon Martin was statistically more likely to be shot by a peer than he was by somebody else", ending with the traditional narrative that despite the "difficult journey" Americans are "becoming a more perfect union – not a perfect union, but a more perfect union" ("Remarks by") .

According to Ishmael Reed, "President Obama, while announcing that black youth are 'disproportionately' into criminal behavior, audaciously fails to mention or address the fraud perpetrated against black mortgage holders by the powerful banking system" (224). Along the same lines, Alicia Garza said that "President Obama (...) took a careful stance that avoided criticizing law enforcement, encouraged trust in a flawed system, and appealed to Black people to look at ourselves and solve the problem of dysfunction in our own communities so that, ostensibly, law enforcement wouldn't find occasion to kill us" (113). Ultimately, Garza argued that this choice of words on Obama's side was meant to secure his position while making no real changes in Black communities (116).

The fact that I referred to the concepts of post-race, and the debates that followed, are just another way of pointing out how sensitive the topic of 'race' still is. It is undeniable that 'race' fuels various discussions in U.S. society and has been the main factor of division since its beginning: from the American Civil War, Jim Crow laws, stereotypical Hollywood narratives, the 1960s Civil Rights Movements, and ongoing movements for black equality up to the more recent Black Lives Matter. They are all evidence of how 'race' is a crucial factor in social relations and the country's history.

Therefore, as ideal as it would be to look at someone beyond their physical characteristics, the widespread violence towards Black people proves that there is still a long way to go to reach that evolutionary stage. Within these different characteristics, the color of someone's skin seems to be the more obvious reason for differential treatment. As insignificant as skin color may be, since it neither guarantees nor takes away anyone's abilities, it would nevertheless be too naive to ignore the importance that specific physical characteristics play in everyday life. As critical race theorist Ian F. López sums up, "[h]uman fate still rides upon ancestry and appearance. The characteristics of our hair, complexion, and facial features still influence whether we are figuratively free or enslaved. Race dominates our personal lives. (…) Race determines our economic prospects. (…) Race permeates our politics. (…) in short, race mediates every aspect of our lives" (239).

But what is 'race'? The definition is necessary, because, according to López, 'race' has had a huge impact on personal lives, determining freedoms, economic achievements, politics, in sum, every little "aspect of [people's] lives." *Race* may be "American's single most confounding problem, but the confounding problem of race is that few people seem to know what race is" (240).

Even though the concept of biological 'race' has been refuted, it is undeniable that 'race' remains rooted in social relations. If minorities are still subject to racial discrimination, then it is undeniable how the 'race' factor plays a key role in that discrimination. If 'race' is irrelevant, why does it still play the leading role in employment possibilities, house rent, access to adequate health care, education, and justice?

Without a concrete correspondence in biology, the category must then be understood as a mere social construct. It therefore has no fixed meanings but is, in turn, a very volatile and plastic notion whose meanings can change rapidly over time. Thus, categories such as 'black' or 'white' were constructed by the same system that established gender and class norms among human beings. With no fixed meaning, the characteristics attributed to them are socially transmitted, whatever the context [14].Therefore, 'race' should be understood as 'social race', or 'racial formation,' "founded on the argument that 'race' is a social construction and not a universal or essential category of biology" (Barker and Jane 296). As such white identity is as much as a social fabrication as Black's, "and whites are equally, or even more highly, implicated in preserving the racially constructed status quo (López 240).

The dialogue around 'race' in U.S. society remains a sensitive issue that only proves that past wounds have been obscured, silenced, and unacknowledged. For the lack of more significant debate on these issues, many conservatives who keep denying the existence of racism in U.S. society are the ones who also reject debates around the concept of 'social race.' These debates, to which Critical Race Theory owes much of its existence, have done nothing but try to understand how 'race' needs to be addressed if issues of racial discrimination are still to be solved.

Like counter-stories that developed alternative narratives to the Master Narrative of history, C.R.T. appeared to mediate the debates around race and how it should be addressed. On this basis, one of the topics on which C.R.T was based was the assumption that racism in the U.S is endemic; it exists in all social relations and has been passed on as natural. As such, it ends up being a complex issue to deal with, since it is not recognized.

A second point is the necessity to see color, a consideration connected to perceiving how 'social race' is real. At an innocent and poorly thought-out first glance, this necessity to make 'race' visible

[14] Once in England, and being myself from southern Europe, I had always thought of myself as a white person. However, a train ride to London would become memorable when an English teenage girl got up from her seat and called me a "Mediterranean scum." My dark curly hair, dark eyes, and slightly different skin pigmentation than hers gave me away. This regrettable story proves how fluid the concepts of blackness or whiteness are in time and space. In Portugal, I was considered white; however, I was not perceived as such in England. Therefore, it is necessary to recognize that 'race,' while not existing biologically, i exists in society and mediates social interactions.

can be considered discriminatory. However, this argument only conceives it as biological, failing to understand its social meaning. To try to obscure its importance is to deny the discrimination that Black people and other minorities constantly suffer. Illustrating this is the *All Lives Matter* slogan, which appeared as a counter-response to the *Black Lives Matter*[15] protests. The morality that all human lives matter is taken already for granted. As David Theo Goldberg stated, "All Lives Matter is a universal moral principle, a Kantian categorical imperative. Other things being equal, all lives matter, equally. Except when they don't. And they don't when other things are taken not to be equal. Like racial standing in a society such as ours" (Goldberg).

The slogan is a flawed generalization that only disguises the importance of a movement that highlights the fact that Black lives keep on being the primary target of police violence and social discrimination based on their 'race.' Drawing a parallel to this, but for gender interests, feminist writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie defended the importance of addressing feminism as a specific issue within human rights, explaining that generalizing the concept would be to deny the problem of gender targeting women (41).

In the same vein, 'race' needs to be treated as a current issue and should not be obscured by 'color blindness.' The idea of denying seeing color, even if seemingly good-intended, becomes, in the end, a tar baby. Racism exists, and ignoring this fact is a way to maintaining it. The failure to see color is the failure to see the existence of a problem, of how this 'social race' has real-life effects on people who are conceived to be 'racialized,' which is to say, to have different traits from those who belong to the dominant culture — despite the fact that the latter are themselves racialized as well.

The need to analyze ideas based on 'race' goes hand in hand with the need to deconstruct the Master Narrative of history and use counter-memory to provide new narratives that complement it and bring in different perspectives. According to Richard Delgado this technique, where Lee's films can be counted in, "can show that what we believe is ridiculous, self-serving, or cruel. They can show us the way out of the trap of unjustified exclusion. They can help us understand when it is time to reallocate power" (72).

By analyzing Lee's films, I intend to show how white supremacy, as bell hooks affirmed, is a better expression to explain the oppression experienced by black people in the U.S. (*Talking Back* 192) and how the concept of whiteness goes further than someone's 'white' color; It is rather an idea adopted to observe the world where power games come into play. The biggest challenge of whiteness

[15] The B.L.M. movement and organization began with Alicia Garza, when she wrote an angry hashtag on Twitter in response to the verdict that acquitted George Zimmerman of the murder of Trayvon Martin. She wrote the following: "Our lives are hanging in the balance. Young black boys in this country are not safe. Black men in this country are not safe. This verdict will create many more George Zimmermans" (110).

is to understand how people who fall into this category are as racialized as Blacks and how the concept, as Lipsitz states, goes further to be a condition rather than a color (*The Possessive* viii). It is a fabricated identity which grants higher possibilities in the social escalade, while restricting people, who are not encompassed in this identity, from having the same opportunities as 'white people.'

At the same time, I intend to expose how popular culture is working to dismantle these same structures and certain racial notions so that everyone can understand how absurd they are. Namely, how Lee's *Blackkklansman* (2018) can be read as a film that deconstructs stereotypes, both from outside the black community and within it. Exposing the dangers of white supremacy and its anti-Semitic, homophobic, misogynistic *facete*, Lee alerts the audience to why it must be taken seriously. *Blackkklansman* also exposes and questions particular identities reaffirming my earlier point about how 'whiteness' and 'blackness' are social constructs. Furthermore, I will consider how intersectionality can help to explain the common humanity and discrimination different people suffer, illustrated in *Blackkklansman* by the character of Flip, a Jew, and Ron Stallworth, an African American man.

Spike Lee clearly illustrates the issues surrounding white supremacy in several of his 'joints'. In Lee's *Blackkklansman,* the story around the Jewish police partner who did not seem to be as involved in the fight against the K.K.K. as his Black partner is an example. This lack of interest and awareness is explained as he had always considered himself "just a white kid." (Lee *Blackkklansman* 1:08:24). His insurgence, and the realization that he was also a part of the same chain of oppression, occurs when he recognizes that his identity as a Jew is also discriminated by the K.K.K. Therefore, the color of his skin, if at first conceived as 'white,' was not enough for him to be accepted in the group.

The same issue is debated in Lee's *Do the Right Thing,* in the conversation between the characters of Mookie and Pino, when Mookie confronts Pino on calling everybody a nigger but still admiring Black idols.

> Mookie: Pino, all you ever talk about is nigger this and nigger that, and all your favorite people are so-called niggers.
> Pino: It's different. Magic, Eddie, Prince are not niggers. I mean, they're not black, I mean. Let me explain myself. They're not really black. I mean, they're black, but they're not really black. They're more than black. It's different" (Lee *Do the Right Thing* 00:46:16).

Pino's heroes, either in music or sports, are predominantly black, but he does not perceive them as such. Only because his assumptions about blackness are filled with opposing ideas and stereotypes, for Pino, his heroes are not black; they could be just as 'white' as he is. It seems ironic that Pino, himself an Italian American, could be expelled from the so-called whiteness he embraces.

Lee's contribution to popular culture lies in this exposure of the absurdities of people's perception of identities other than their own. This applies specially to questions of 'social race' and how white supremacy is a lens to the world. The counter-story narrative in Spike Lee's films can operate exactly to question our belief system on matters such as what constitutes 'race,' what racism and white supremacy are, how they work, and how unfounded they all are. These counter-stories primarily reveal to the viewer the common humanity we all share, giving voice to marginalized groups who can connect to experiences like their own through the film's representations.

4.2. Blackkklansman: Black man talking 'white'? Lessons on white supremacy, overlapping identities and politics that resonate with the present.

Blackkklansman (2018) is a brilliant film and an adaptation of Ron Stallworth's 2014 memoir of the same name. In *Blackkklansman,* Lee adapted a challenging story that took place in the 1970s, a significant period for the assertion of black consciousness. He adapts the memoir to connect the past to the present, and to show that despite the apparent foolishness of groups like the K.K.K., they need to be taken seriously. The plot develops around Ron Stallworth, the first Black police officer in the Colorado Springs Police Department, who plans to infiltrate the Ku Klux Klan to get a grip on its terrorist plans. Even though a real-life story, Spike Lee added many more fictional details to suggest the deep-rooted problems in U.S. society, such as structural racism and white supremacy. Despite telling a story from the 1970s, Spike Lee intentionally connects it to the present, namely the Trump era. Even if separated by forty years, the discourses and ideology of white supremacy remain the same and should be taken seriously because the characters represented as idiots in the film eventually reveal their dangerousness to society.

In *Blackkklansman*, Lee not only unmasks racism and white supremacy, exposing its ridiculousness and danger but also challenges the Hollywood Industry itself. This confrontation is achieved, firstly, by recapturing two classic films I already introduced above, *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) and *Gone with the Wind* (1939), exposing their unmistakable racist message as well as their nostalgia for the Confederacy.

Secondly by challenging the usual roles assigned to Blacks by giving them agency in their own stories. As mentioned earlier, even some well-meaning films for the 'black cause' have fallen into the stereotype of the white savior syndrome, presenting the black character as always depending on a

white counterpart for his/her salvation. Movies like *The Help*[16] (2011) or *Hidden Figures*[17] (2016), are all examples that perpetuate the white-savior syndrome and do nothing to empower black characters.

In contrast to this, Spike Lee gives voice to black characters who are educated and organized. From Ron Stallworth, an educated man who becomes a police detective, to the Colorado College Black Student Union woman president. In contrast, the members of the K.K.K. are clumsy, uneducated, false, and ignorant, meeting in underground clubs or their private homes, avoiding their identity and masking the KKK by calling it 'the organization.'

Lee chose to begin *Blackkklansman* by projecting the famous scene where Scarlett O'Hara (Vivien Leigh, in *Gone with The Wind)* desperately searches for a doctor in the middle of a vast train station where hundreds of wounded Confederate soldiers lie on the ground. The scene ends with the Confederate Flag torn but still waving. This choice of imagery is not unintentional; Lee uses it to remind the audience that the nostalgia for the Confederacy, and all that it implies, is still alive in the country, as is the waving flag that still seems to assert itself. Furthermore, the choice of this old film works as a technique to mention not only the "Lost Cause" narrative that the film elevates but also the cinematic history itself and the representations that supported the same type of narrative. Scarlet O'Hara's desperate scene is interspersed with the next, which, filmed in black and white, is as or even more disturbing than the previous one.

Here a Dr. Kennebrew Beauregard — played by Alec Baldwin, a fictional character who could notwithstanding be real — is ushered into a dimly lit room, passing in front of the Confederate flag, a bookcase, and a wall where a gun, a portrait, and some diplomas are hanging. He then sits down to give a lesson on the American Civil War. This 'lesson' is, shortly after, understood to be a rehearsal of a speech about to be videotaped. With melodic music playing in the background, he greets his "fellow Americans," saying that "[they] are under attack" and that "[they] are living in an era marked by the spread of integration and miscegenation" (Lee *Blackkklansman* 0:01:54 - 0:02:03). The stern speech quickly turns into a series of constant grunts and interruptions that ridicule him.

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[16] *The Help* (2011) is a movie directed by Tate Taylor (a white male director). While brilliantly performed by Octavia Spencer and Viola Davis, it is nothing more than a continuation of a white-savior narrative. Usually, in these types of narratives, race issues are looked at through the lens of a white protagonist. Furthermore, the roles assigned to Blacks are diminished, as if they are not strong enough or capable of subverting their situations. Particularly, in *The Help*, the critical stories of the maids and their importance in the movie ended up being stolen, highlighting instead that of the white protagonist. One can say that these films perpetuate old stereotypes, are for mass consumption, and are more addressed to a white audience. Ultimately, these narratives portray race in such lighthearted ways that only give a feeling of comfort, disguising the inherent problems hidden in the story, and are not a real call for attention.

[17] In this film, one of the scenes where the white-savior syndrome is most notable is when Al Harrison (Kevin Costner) removes a famous bathroom sign for people of color to help his colleague Katherine G. Johnson, (Taraji P. Henson).

However, as ridiculous as this speech may appear, this approach is dangerous and must be taken seriously. The professor's tone quickly becomes angrier. Cut to another setting, now standing up and grunting; he shouts, while footage of the Little Rock Nine[18] being escorted by the National Guard plays in the projection of the 'lesson'. Lee's intention is twofold: to educate the public about African American history and its achievements and show the ridiculousness of those who oppose the same development.

Dr. Kennebrew Beauregard's speech is frankly racist and is there to satiate the ideology of white supremacy. He carries on by mentioning that "the Brown decision, forced upon [them] by the Jewish-controlled puppets on the U.S. Supreme Court, compelling white children to go to school with an inferior race, is the final nail in a coffin, is the final nail in a black coffin towards America becoming a mongrel nation" (Lee *Blackkklansman* 0:02:14). The contrast Lee wants to show is that even though Dr. Beauregard presents himself in a room with books and dresses in a tuxedo, this fact in no way matches his behavior. He is portrayed as clumsy, mispronouncing words, sometimes too nervous.

Like the narrative in *Gone with the Wind,* he also resents the loss of "[their] great way of life," something he makes a point of repeating several times. He diminishes the name of Martin Luther King Jr., while displaying a billboard that reads "Martin Luther King in a Communist Training School," accusing him and the Civil Rights Movement of being guilty of destroying his "holy white Protestant values." The speech proceeds while, behind Beauregard, the quintessential racist Hollywood film *The Birth of a Nation* (1915) is projected, almost obscuring his face.

Even before the film's story begins and we are introduced to Ron Stallworth's character, Lee wants to make sure that the audience experiences the uncomfortable position of seeing and feeling these racist insults and stereotypical representations of black people. With this approach, he intends to make the roots of American racism familiar to the audience. This is accomplished by choosing the scene in *The Birth of a Nation* where Blacks in the House of Representatives are portrayed as animalistic, eating chicken with their hands, barefoot, and sticking their feet up on tables, as if they are disinterested in the political machinery. These images are meant to highlight the stereotypical constructions of white supremacists on Blacks and, much in the cinematic style of Spike Lee, to wake up movie-goers to different realities.

[18] The Little Rock Nine was a group of nine Black students who enrolled in an all-white high school in Little Rock, Arkansas, in September 1957. Their enrolment and attendance at the school was a test to the Brown v. Board of Education verdict and a milestone in U.S. history when the 1954 Supreme Court decision declared segregation in public schools unconstitutional.

All this unfolds as his speech exposes white supremacists' absolute values and fears, "Do you really want your precious white child going to school with Negroes? They're lying, dirty monkeys, stopping at nothing to gain their equality with white men. Rapists, murderers, craving the virgin white" (0:03:02), says Dr. Kennebrew Beauregard, blundering his script and asking, "is it 'virgin pure?" (0:03:18). As he mispronounces the speech, the classic scene from *The Birth of a Nation*, of the white girl throwing herself off a cliff to keep a black man from touching her, is projected while he keeps on slandering: "Rapists, murderers, craving the virgin pure flesh of white women. They are super predators!" (Lee *Blackkklansman* 0:03:21).

What must be emphasized is that not only do white supremacists despise Black people but, as an ideology, white supremacy excludes more than it includes. In this same vein, Dr Beauregard's speech not only persecutes Black but also Jewish people, ending in a very heated speech:

> And the Negro's insidious tactics, under the tutelage of high-ranking, blood-sucking Jews, using an army of outside northern black beast preda... agitators. God, watch this! God! Using an army of outside northern black beast agitators determined to overthrow the God-commanded and biblically inspired rule of the white race. It's an international Jewish conspiracy. May God bless us all (Lee *Blackkklansman* 0:03:29).

Along the same line, gender identity is also crucial. From the beginning, as Dr Beauregard speaks into a camera, a woman's voice is heard without her face ever being revealed, and this misogyny that members of the Klan hold is recurrent throughout the film, namely in the character Connie Kendrickson, played by Ashlie Atkinson. Connie, married to Felix Kendrickson is always left out of the Klan's private meetings, and whenever she steps in, her presence is strangely felt every time she speaks or tries to give her opinion. Similarly, women are excluded during Ron Stallworth's acceptance into the Klan ceremony, coming in just as the ceremony ends. However, when it comes to executing the party's plans, Connie is taken to "the battlefield," revealing only the cowardice of the same Klan men who diminished her before.

The next scene deeply contrasts with the previous one, showing the landscape of Colorado Spring and its mountain terrain, while a soundtrack plays music style of Blaxploitation films. Before the main character enters, directing his gaze to the camera with his proud afro hair, Lee wants the audience to be assured that even though "Dis joint is based upon dome fo' real, fo real sh*t" (Lee *Blackkklansman* 0:04:32), other relevant issues were added to the discussion. Problematics such as the politics of black beauty, with hair scenes being quite relevant in his films, and the question of overlapping identities, as being 'white' and simultaneously Jewish. Above all, however, Lee tries once

again to deconstruct stereotypes about 'race' and open a discussion about white privilege and how it disguises its racial construction.

The first appearance of Ron Stallworth, portrayed by John David Washington, is crucial in affirming the character's appearance and identity. In the memoir, Ron Stallworth mentions his afro hair when he joined the police force and the story of his cop's cap that did not fit on his head (12). This caused him, albeit proudly, to "walk down those city streets in [his] police uniform, looking like a damn clown" (13). He had ordered the lieutenant to get him a proper hat until his boss saw him wearing that cap, "I had beaten him at this own game, Jackie Robinson would have been proud, I think" (13), he wrote. This passage is relevant as it shows that Blacks were typically not part of a system that had traditionally been biased against them, which in turn and for the same reason, had little education and information about hair policy and its relevance. This lack of awareness is evident since white police officers were not confronted with these issues, revealing how much the mentality of white supremacy is found in what can be considered microaggressions against black bodies. The mention to Jackie Robinson, both by Lee in the film and Ron Stallworth in his book, is an example of the famous only black player on a predominantly white team. Like Stallworth, Jackie played within a white team, being the only black player. In Stallworth's case, he was within a system that looked like treason in the eyes of his black counterparts. He states in his memoir:

> Because I and others like me had chosen to wear a badge, gun, and blue uniform representative of the forces of an "oppressive" (their point of view) government and enforce what they perceived to be naturally unjust laws specifically designed to work against those victimized by that oppression, we had become modern-day "house slaves" – house niggers, each of us a black Judas who had chosen to collaborate with the governmental "massa" (master) and enforce the "white man's justice." We had become slaves to the "system," the white man's "boy," as I was called on many occasions during my career by my self-proclaimed black "brothers" (26).

In the film, the scene in which Stallworth walks in for his job interview is iconic. First, the cinematic technique used by Lee, with two cops looking directly at the camera puts the viewer in the same intimidating place as the character, since it seems as if they are also looking at the audience. Then we get to know Ron, who has nothing to fear, looking at the same camera. The interview begins with Mr. Turrentine's question, "Why weren't you drafted into the Vietnam War?" (Lee *Blackkklansman* 00:05:11), to which he replies that he "went to college" (Lee *Blackkklansman* 00:05:14), indicating that he is an educated man. The relevance of talking about the Vietnam War — which will be discussed further when discussing Lee's *Da 5 Bloods* (2020) — is not only meant to alert the audience that it is the 1970s and Americans are fighting overseas, but also to mention that so are black people fighting a war for a country that discriminates against them. Thus, when asked by Mr.

Turrentine, "How do you feel about the Vietnam war?" (Lee *Blackkklansman* 00:05:15), Ron responds, saying that he has "mixed feelings" (Lee *Blackkklansman* 00:05:18). Even though he is black and suffers discrimination, he is still an American; this is his land that he also feels he must defend. What Ron declares to be his "mixed feelings" can best be expressed in W.E.B. Du Bois's concept of "double consciousness" (Du Bois 8-9).

The same theme is later recaptured in the film when Patrice, the Student Union's president who gets involved with Ron, is walking in a nature pathway and talking to Ron:

> Patrice: What did Dubois say about "Double Consciousness"? "Two-ness." Being an American and a Negro? Two Souls? Two Thoughts? Two warring ideals in one Dark Body?
> Ron Stallworth: I know how that feels. I'm Two damn people all the time!
> Patrice: But you shouldn't be! We shouldn't have a War going on inside ourselves. Why can't we just be Black People?
> Ron Stallworth: Because we're not there yet! (Lee *Blackkklansman* 1:03:45).

As the interview goes on, Ron proves his solidity of character. Ron does not frequent nightclubs. He is not a womanizer, and drinks "only on special occasions" (Lee *Blackkklansman* 00:05:27). He does not use drugs, to the astonishment of Mr. Turrentine, who states that "that's kind of rare these days for a young Hip Soul Brother like you" (Lee *Blackkklansman* 0:05:37). However, what stands out the most is that Ron will be the first black cop in their quarters. Even though he finds himself on the police force, he is warned that he will have to learn to deal with his white colleagues, who have their prejudices against black people, and he is advised to try to ignore them as much as possible if such discrimination would happen. "Mr. Turrentine: if someone calls you Nigger will you be able to turn the other cheek? (Lee *Blackkklansman* 0:05:54 — 0:06:35).

Even if disturbed by the question, Ron decides that he must cope with the system if he wants the job. Ron is then accepted into the police force and sent to the records room where he is immediately confronted with the racist slurs he had been warned about in his interview, as the agent there asks him about "toads" — a derogatory term for African Americans. The constant slurs make him realize he is better at being an undercover cop.

He wakes up to a new day as he is given a new assignment in the narcotics division, as he intended. However, his first assignment puts him in a delicate position. He is infiltrating an audience about to attend a speech by Kwame Ture (formerly, Stokely Carmichael), a prominent figure during the Civil Rights Movement, very influenced by Malcolm X and a strong supporter of Black Power philosophy. The fear of affirmation of blackness within the police force is evident in the following speech by Chief Bridges:

Chief Bridges: Carmichael is a former high muckity-muck with The Black Panthers and as far as I'm concerned, FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover was dead right when he said the Black Panthers are the greatest internal threat to the security of these United States. This Carmichael joker, former Panther or not, well they say he is a damn good speaker and so we don't want this Carmichael getting into the minds of the good black people here in Colorado Springs and stirring them up? (Lee *Blackkklansman* 00:12:12).

The speech resembles that in Lee's Malcolm X, when the K.K.K. shows up and burns down Malcolm X's father's house, accusing him of "stirring up the good niggers" with his preaching. Again, the system is so biased that Chief Bridges sees a threat in the gathering of college students and in this speech somehow stirring up the "good black people" in the area. As for Ron Stallworth, Du Bois' double consciousness can also be applied here. For he knows what it is to be black, but he is also a policeman. As he wrote in his memoirs: "Now, I was proud of being both black and a cop. I was proud of my blackness without being angry. I was in awe of Stokely because he was a figure of the civil rights movement. (…) But now here I was being thrust into this unique situation, and I had no qualms because I could differentiate being a cop who was black and a black man in white America" (26).

Back to the film, before Stallworth enters the meeting, on the outside set, one can find posters reading "Black Power," "All Power to All da People," as well as the typical closed black fist, an enduring symbol of black resistance. Once inside, the meeting does not seem threatening at all. The students are polite and educated. In turn, the keynote speaker, Kwame Ture, awakens the students' minds to the need to love themselves and affirm their Black beauty, mentioning that "it is time for [them] to stop run away from being black" (Lee *Blackkklansman* 0:16:33), and that they are the generation who will have to change the mindset and define the standards of beauty for black people in their country.

At the same time, the camera focuses on the many different faces in the audience, smiling beautifully at his speech. It is this new acceptance and paradigm shift, the beauty politics cause, that leads Ture to say, "That's black power!" (Lee *Blackkklansman* 0:16:59). Interestingly, we see articulate Black intellectual leaders, who will later stand in stark contrast to the leaders of the K.K.K. Once again, we see the shattering of stereotypes about Black people, especially those popularized by the film Industry, and which Ture makes a point of mentioning distinctly in the Tarzan movies, in which the representation of African people was so perverse that even Black Americans felt ashamed of their African heritage and ended up hating themselves, proving once again how negative representations impact the white audience as much as those who see themselves represented in it.

Another relevant issue that Ture brings in is the Vietnam war, which he says is illegal and immoral. The issue of the war not only reminds the audience that there are as many internal as external

conflicts happening around the United States. Moreover, the theme of the Vietnam war, which I will deepen in the analysis of Lee's *Da 5 Blood* (2020), is relevant as it questions why black people should fight for a country that discriminates against them. This internal conflict is the reason that leads Ture to say: "I'd rather see a Brotha kill a white racist cop than kill a Vietnamese. Because, at least, if he kills a racist cop, he's doing it for a reason. Because they are shooting black people in the backs, in these streets, right here, in this very country. They're killing us like dogs! Right here! Right here!" (Lee *Blackkklansman* 0:20:39).

Having completed his first investigation, it is his second, infiltrating the Klan, that will be the film's crux. While unfolding the newspaper, Ron Stallworth comes across an ad for admission to the Ku Klux Klan. Searching more information, he calls the number listed, and soon his call is returned. For cinematic thrills, Lee does not mention the actual address. However, he will bring this up near the end of the film, revealing the mystery that hang over two Klan men who never revealed their identities even to Flip Zimmerman (the Jew who will be Ron's double at the real K.K.K. encounters). The reason is that the exact address is related to a crucial and shocking fact; I resort to Stallworth's book once again, as it provides more inside knowledge than the film, suggesting that there are clear links between the Klan and the U.S. military:

> As I looked over the classified ads, one in particular caught my eye. It read: *Ku Klux Klan. For Information Contact P.O. Box 4771. Security, Colorado 80230.* Now there was something unusual. The town of Security was a suburban housing development area located southeast of Colorado Springs near two main military bases: Fort Carson and NORAD (North American Aerospace Defense Command). The community was predominantly military, and there had been no known Klan activity in these parts (1-2).

In the film, Ron phones the Klan. The series of conversations that he will handle over the phone with the members of the Ku Klux Klan will question and ridicule the social constructions of 'race.' He will pass off as white on the phone, breaking down the stereotypes about the voice having 'color.' A stereotype also held by Stallworth's Chief, who does not believe that his voice can pass off as a white man's.

On this matter, and for the same reason, Chief Bridges is skeptical about the viability of the whole operation. He believes that his "way of speaking" will be different from his white counterpart on the ground. "They are going to know the difference between how a white man talks and how a Negro [does?]" (Lee *Blackkklansman* 0:31:28), he says. Stallworth's question "how exactly does a Black man talk?" (Lee *Blackkklansman* 0:31:33) is not answered. Very assertive, he says that "[he] would like to speak for [himself]" and very self-assuredly says that "some of us speak King's English, some of us

speak jive. Ron Stallworth happens to be fluent in both" (Lee *Blackkklansman* 0:31:43). He can code-switch, but the opposite does not happen. Ron may know the real men behind the sheets, but they cannot know or understand whom they oppose. In terms of breaking the stereotype of a 'black voice,' the most iconic and laughable scene is a particular conversation between Ron and David Duke, the Klan's Grand Wizard and head supreme, when Duke is sure to be talking to an "Aryan white man by the way [he pronounces] certain words" (Lee *Blackkklansman* 1:18:03)", not knowing at all that on the other end of the line he is talking to a black policeman.

Ron Stallworth's code-switching, and his ability to do so, are continuously found in the conversations with Klan members. His first contact with the Klan is with Walter (a K.K.K. member played by Ryan Eggold), who asks about his story. Since he knows with whom he is dealing, he is clever enough to present a hate speech that will satisfy the requirements of anyone willing to join a group like the K.K.K. It is also a piece of cinematic history, the moment when this conversation takes place. The background noise of the office ceases, and his colleagues stop to listen to him talking on the phone in a speech he deliberately makes against himself and his people.

> Ron Stallworth: Well, since you asked, since you asked, I hate Niggers. I hate Jews, Spics and Mexs, Dagos and Chinks; but my mouth to God's ears, I really hate those Nigger Rats, and anyone else, really, that does not have pure White Aryan Blood running through their veins. My sister, Pamela, she was just recently accosted by one of those black coons. (…) Every time I think about that black baboon putting his filthy black hands on her purest white driven snow body, I mean pure, Walter, she's a saint, she's an angel, it makes me wanna puke!
> Walter Breachway: You are just the kind of guy we are looking for (Lee *Blackkklansman* 0:29:34).

Ron Stallworth is keenly aware of the fear that K.K.K. members, or any white supremacist, have about miscegenation and how they value the protection of white women. This leads Ron to invoke a made-up sister who has the "purest white drive snow body" and who was approached by a black man, revealing a potential danger in the eyes of the K.K.K.

As the investigation unfolds, the next exciting theme is about overlapping identities, such as the case of Flip Zimmerman, Ron's Jewish double, when the time comes to meeting in person with K.K.K. members. Flip is a character to whom Lee has added this identity to prove how specific identities can suffer discrimination. Because of the color of his skin, he can pass as 'white.' Even though he is Jewish, this identity can be bypassed, showing once again the privileges that specific skin color possesses. Ron, for his part, could never do it. Nevertheless, at the same time, they can and do make a point of passing themselves off as white so that they do not suffer prejudice. Flip's identity as a Jew never seemed to

have been a problem for him, precisely because in their eyes and the eyes of others, he would pass for just any other white kid.

> Ron: You've been passing for a WASP. White Anglo Saxon Protestant. Cherry pie, hot dog, white boy. It's what some light-skinned black folks do, they pass for white.
> Ron: Doesn't that hatred that you've been hearing the Klan said. Doesn't that pisses you off?
> Flip: Of course, it does.
> Ron Stallworth: Then why you acting like you ain't got skin in the Game Bro'? (Lee *Blackkklansman* 0:56:07).

Only until he starts attending meetings will Flip realize that the Klan members discriminate against his people, too. Siding with the oppressor, denying his identity, was not an easy task, and it is this realization that will make him wonder how much he has hidden his identity and passed as a white person [19]. Bypassing as 'white,' Flip is distancing himself from the Jewish community he originally belongs to and putting on a masked identity that grants him privileges without realizing it. The inner problem is that Flip can never be fully satisfied, as he seems to be navigating two worlds. Flip knows that is not a 'W.A.S.P.,' even though he has been passed off as one. Simultaneously, he feels that acceptance of his Jewish identity will come at a price. The price of discrimination and anti-Semitism. For Flip, the ultimate realization of his overlapping identities comes in the following speech:

> Flip Zimmerman: I'm Jewish, yes, but I wasn't raised to be. It wasn't part of my life, I never thought much about being Jewish, nobody around me was Jewish. I wasn't going to a bunch of Bar Mitzvahs; I didn't have a Bar Mitzvah. I was just another white kid. And now I'm in some basement denying it out loud. [chuckles] I never thought much about it, now I'm thinking about it all the time. About rituals and heritage. Is that passing? Well then, I have been passing. How about that? (Lee *Blackkklansman* 1:08:24).

As Flip becomes more involved, a Klan member (Felix) suspects that he may be Jewish. The scene is twice tense and comical because Felix wonders to Flip about something the Jews do, which makes him suddenly ask: "Is your dick *circumstanced*?" (Lee *Blackkklansman* 0:53:33). Felix is ignorant, illiterate, getting the spelling of words wrong, proving the kind of men the K.K.K. is made of. For the protection of his colleague, Ron breaks a window where the K.K.K. members are meeting to create a distraction. The members, hearing the apparatus, run towards Ron's car, which escapes amidst gunfire. At the house's entrance, a sign announces, "America love it or leave it," a detail that shows the anti-

[19] This same theme is best expressed in Nella Larsen's 1929 novel *Passing,* where two light-skinned women pass as white, which grants them privileges they would not otherwise have if they asserted their black identity. Much like Flip, these two women live in troubling turmoil. The issue of overlapping identity goes against their original community.

immigration side of white supremacists. An intentional move by Spike Lee to allude to the white supremacists of the present and the same political intentions of Donald Trump's politics as the 45th president of the United States of America.

The infiltration carries its way, and Ron receives his K.K.K. membership card, while hate messages are heard on a recording tape "the negro wants your white woman, and your job" or "the Jew wants your money" (Lee *Blackkklansman* 0:57:04). The internal racism within the police is not left behind and is represented in Andy Landers (Frederick Weller), a racist cop who mistreats Ron and is abusive towards Black people. It is relevant to mention that his colleagues acknowledge his destructive methods though, even mentioning that he was responsible for having shot a "black kid" years ago. However, "[they] are a family" and "right or wrong [they] stick together" (Lee *Blackkklansman* 0:59:38), to which Ron replies that these types of attitudes remind him "of another group" (Lee *Blackkklansman* 0:59:44), drawing a parallel to the very K.K.K.

Before Stallworth's formal initiation into the K.K.K. and the gathering of the students to hear Jerome Turner — a fictional character played by Harry Belafonte and an imaginary friend of the real Jesse Washington, whose murder will be detailed in the film — one of the most compelling and emotional scenes takes place, after the K.K.K. members (where Flip is performing in disguise) practice their shooting in an outdoor field. The camera focuses on them, presenting them as a bunch of fools, drunks and homophobes, which is inferred by the following comments about a "decent bar" (Lee *Blackkklansman* 1:00:04) that has turned into "a filthy fag bar overnight" (Lee *Blackkklansman* 1:00:05), complaining about how soon these people — homosexuals — will require "equal treatment" (Lee *Blackkklansman* 1:00:17).

In a scene in which Lee once again highlights two factors: how exclusionary white supremacy is and how Klan members are threatening despite their apparent foolishness. When the members of the Klan are no longer in that field where they practiced their shooting, Ron Stallworth enters, catching one of the bullets from the area. The image that follows is shocking and deeply emotional. The movie screen shows that members of the Klan were not shooting aimlessly but at six model figures resembling black people. Ron walks emotionally towards the model figures and stares at them for some time. The figures have holes in their heads, hearts, and lips. When the camera changes angle, the screen completes the image. The six figures are arranged in a disposition as if trying to escape. The image evokes various feelings as well as references such as those of black people fleeing during slavery times, namely in the underground railroad; and also, to a more popular cultural logo such as that the band Public Enemy uses, in which a Black man appears as the target to be shot.

The tension in the film continues to build, as flyers from the Klan are distributed around a Black neighborhood with the intention of intimidating the inhabitants. As they look bewildered at the brochures, Ron shows up and says that "maybe [they] should call the police" (Lee *Blackkklansman* 1:10:04), to which Hakeem — a student from the Black Students Union — wonders "How we know this ain't some of the K.K.K.'s Honky-Pig-Partners passing out this Shit!" (Lee *Blackkklansman* 1:10:06). This suggestion makes the audience wonder how much the police is involved with the K.K.K.

The same idea is more clearly repeated in a scene when Ron meets with a man whose name is only "Agent Y." Meeting in an old and abandoned Brewster's Factory, the agent drops a piece of information. Two members of the Klan (the two mystery men whose identity is always unknown) work at NORAD — the North American Air Defense Command. Proving the close ties between the K.K.K. and the U.S. Government, this scene asks a crucial question: how can people who work in such important top secure level organizations of the U.S. government simultaneously be part of the Klan?

The Director aims at raising awareness about the fact that the racist and the white supremacist systems are so deeply ingrained in the U.S. society that it goes far beyond social relations, extending to the very politics that have been biased against black people. The several mentions to David Duke in the 70s and his political ambitions are not for sure in vain. Indeed, after the failed attempt of a cross burning, one can hear David Duke's voice in what seems to be a radio broadcasting, extolling a white supremacist discourse that may be convincing to many:

> David Duke: Every politician has to talk and genuflect to the real rulers of our society and say, "I want thank the Jewish People. I love the Jewish People. And the Jewish People are always our friends. No matter what they do. No matter how much they destroy our country. It's just wonderful. We just love the Jews." No Senator or Congressman would dare get up and say, "I love White People. I love White Heritage. I love my People and I love the culture that was created in Europe and this great Western Christian Civilization. I want to see that perceiver. You know, I want to see that be enriched (Lee *Blackkklansman* 1:12:21).

White supremacist groups can easily understand the discourse, which, among various arguments, usually uses a sense of victimization to appeal to the cause. According to the article "How White Supremacists Use Victimhood to Recruit", Olga Khazan argues that there are five fallacious but catchy arguments to capture the attention of white supremacists. One is to claim that their rights are being denied and that the civil rights movement has provided unbalanced rights, giving blacks more benefits than whites. Worth noting is also the victimhood claim that they too suffer discrimination, the feeling of being denied their history and passing it on to their children, and ultimately the natural fear of the elimination of the 'white race,' which could happen with interracial marriages. It is precisely this

fear that leads them to support segregation so that the 'races' do not mix, and the 'pure white lineage' continues. Khazan also states that "these claims of subjugation may seem silly coming from whites, a group that still earns more, lives longer, and feels overall happier than African Americans do. But (...) victimhood is a powerful psychological mechanism for recruiting members, galvanizing around a cause, and forming what is essentially a support group — for people who really don't need support."

David Duke's words are but a clear illustrative example of a typical white supremacist discourse. Namely when it comes to the threat to white identity. This evidence is what Trina Grillo and Stephanie M. Wildman define as "Taking back the center". In their essay "Obscuring the Importance of Race," they say that "white supremacy creates in whites the expectation that issues of concern to them will be central in every discourse" (410). Since they are part of dominant groups, they "are already accustomed to being center stage," as society has been naturally rendering this 'order of things'" (410). Moreover, they state, "when people who are not regarded as entitled to the center move into it, however briefly, they are viewed as usurpers. One reaction of the group temporarily deprived of the center is to make sure that nothing remains for the perceived usurpers to be in the center of" (410-411).

David Duke's speech in the film is critical for showing his anti-Semitic side and how much of these same fallacious arguments are still very much alive today. Namely, in what many white supremacists claim to be 'reverse racism'. Reverse racism is vital to mention because it came about after affirmative action or favorable discrimination policy was established, a set of guidelines that emerged in the 1970s to grant educational opportunities or employment possibilities to people who belonged to previously discriminated groups and had been underrepresented in society.

The figure of David Duke is relevant in U.S. history itself, and the ongoing telephone conversations in the film reveal precisely his political intentions for the future, some coming to fruition in real life. He was the Grand Wizard of the K.K.K. from 1974 to 1980 and 1989 to 1992, a member of the Louisiana House of Representatives. Recently, and not surprisingly, he was one of Donald Trump's most acerbic supporters for the presidency of the United States in 2016. Duke's fictional dialogue connect the audience to the very present, as he says to Ron "this is why we need more people like us in Public Office. To get this country back on track. (…) For America to achieve its greatness again" (Lee *Blackkklansman* 1:13:50)[20].

[20] The uncanny similarity to the same formulas on both sides of politics is not unintentional. Several politicians have used the catchphrase on both the Democratic and Republican sides. For example, during Ronald Reagan's 1980s political campaign, he used the slogan "Let's Make America Great Again." The same would be shortened and popularized more recently by Donald Trump's "Make America Great Again." The acronym of his slogan, M.A.G.A., would eventually connect with his supporters as a coded language of racism. However, highlighting the intricacies of American politics, Bill Clinton also used the phrase in 1991 to run for president.

In another scene, in a formal meeting with the Klansmen and David Duke, which takes place after Ron Stallworth's religious initiation into the K.K.K., the similarities between David Duke and Donald Trump continue to be in evidence, as Duke and the Klansmen shout "America first" (Lee *Blackkklansman* 1:42:45) resembling the very words pronounced by Trump on his inauguration day as he stated that "from[that] day forward, it [would be] only, America first, America first"(Trump 0:19).Lee chose to have the character using these phrases to connect the audience to current politics. This intention is to show how ridiculous these people can be. However, they can be ignored for the same reason while also ignoring the danger they can harbor in themselves. The lack of investment in paying attention to these ideological movements causes them to go unnoticed, later bursting out to everyone's amazement.

Donald Trump's victory is an accurate reflection of this point. His idiocy — arguably a marketing technique to put him in the spotlight — had been constantly ridiculed and ignored by much of society. This mockery was done by several famous actors, comedians, and even the former president Barack Obama, who would never consider him as fit for a future president (Obama et al. 5:17). His victory over Hillary Clinton created a bitter feeling of disbelief in many Americans. Spike Lee's famous wake-up call points out that even if seemingly idiotic, these phrases engage audiences and elect presidents, which is specifically addressed when Sergeant Trapp mentions how people like David Duke adapt their rhetoric so that their hate speech becomes normalized, and how it is this acceptance over time that elects presidents. A broader critique both to the election of Donald Trump and the innocence of those who disbelieve in his victory can be perceived in this scene:

> Sergeant Trapp: I think it's another way to sell hate. Think about it: Affirmative Action, Immigration, Crime, Tax Reform. He says no one wants to be called a bigot anymore. Because Archie Bunker made that too un-cool. So, the idea is under all these issues, everyday Americans can accept it, support it, until eventually, one day, you get somebody in the White House that embodies it.
> Ron Stallworth: Huh, sorry. Come on. America would never elect somebody like David Duke, President of the United States of America.
> Sergeant Trapp: Coming from a black man, that's pretty naive. Why don't you wake up? (Lee *Blackkklansman* 0:47:11).

The climax of the film comes when two very different meetings are compared. Ron Stallworth's initiation ceremony into the Klan is paralleled by another, a session of the Colorado College Black students Union. For Ron/Flip's initiation, David Duke, whom the real Ron Stallworth in the film will escort as his security guard, is greeted with pomp. Several motorcycles follow him to what appears to be a remote warehouse. In contrast, there is a beautiful house in another part of the town where a

tree with red flowers touches several posters with powerful meanings: "All Power to all the People "; "K.K.K. won't take our rights away"; "Peace now"; "Stop the Klan, stop Racism." And before the audience is invited in, a Pan-African flag, also called the African American flag, stands on the balcony — further proof of their affirmation, acceptance, and pride in their identity as Blacks.

The students gather in an intimate room where Black men and women listen to Jerome Turner, on the true story of Jesse Washington's lynching in Texas in 1916. The telling of the story is both moving and outrageous. Everyone listens with compassion and in silence, expressing their sadness. Jerome says that on that day, May 15th, 1916, the lynching of Jesse brought together a crowd of people as if it were a celebration of some kind. At the same time, the hired photographer immortalized the event by transforming and selling it on postcards. During the narration, the camera frames the pictures that some hold in their hands so that the audience can observe them and be equally shocked[i]. The listeners' expressions are sad, serious, and outraged in the room, upon hearing this testimony. The description of Jesse's lynching is intentionally repulsive, shocking and triggers a feeling of revolt in the audience:

> Jerome Turner: May 15th, 1916. (…) They claimed Jesse raped and murdered a white woman (…). They put Jesse on trial, and he was convicted by an all-white jury, after they deliberated for only four minutes (…) and after the verdict, the mob grabbed Jesse, put a chain around his neck and dragged him out of the courthouse. (…) They marched Jesse through the streets, they stabbed him, and beat him, and finally in a bloody heap, they held him down in the street and cut off his testicles. Police and city officials were out there watching him, they cut off his fingers, and threw coal oil all over his body. They lit a bonfire and raised and lowered him over these flames over and over (Lee *Blackkklansman* 1:36:53). (….) The man, a photographer by the name of Gildersleeve, he came and took pictures of the whole thing, those pictures were later sold as postcards (Lee *Blackkklansman* 1:33:26 - 1:34:56- 1:38:00).

Jerome Turner and the students hold the pictures and look at the audience. The close-up camera technique conveys strong emotions to the audience. They want the audience to see them. They are no longer invisible. Then Jerome tells how much Jesse's lynching was driven by the movie *The Birth of a Nation* (1915). The power of the movie, of which Jerome says that today would be called "a blockbuster" (Lee *Blackkklansman* 1:40:36), lied in its visualization by a large audience, including Woodrow Wilson, the president of the United States at the time, who displayed it at the White House. Jerome is keen to mention that the president stated that the movie "was history written with lighting" (Lee *Blackkklansman* 1:40:53).

Both meetings continue to be interspersed with each other. But the mention of *The Birth of a Nation (1915)* is crucial in both sessions. As Jerome sadly talks about the consequences the film has

brought to Black people, at the same time, the members of the Klan show it off, reacting to it in an exaggerated and inflammatory way, getting excited about the violence against Blacks portrayed in the film. The Klan members are loud, admiring the movie but not really paying attention as they eat popcorn and shout by wiggling in their chairs. They act as lunatics, fools, and full of unjustified hatred. Connie, Felix's wife, overly emotional, stands up shouting "the inspiration" (Lee *Blackkklansman* 1:41:19) during the scene in the movie when white children covered in white sheets scare the black children. Frantically, they cheer when images of Klan members riding on their horses violently throw Gus into the hallway of a house, where a piece of paper with K.K.K. branding shows the sign of a skull. They all stand up and exult, shouting "white power" (Lee *Blackkklansman* 1:42:11), while their arms do the Nazi salute.

It is worth mentioning that before the screening of the film, the entire session of the Klan stands in stark contrast to that of the Black Student Union. When the K.K.K. ceremony began, the speech's message evokes the white race's eugenic superiority by using a religious vocabulary to support their beliefs, with David Duke stating that the superiority of the 'white race' is a fact (Lee *Blackkklansman* 1:34:17). This ritual ceremony in an abandoned empty and big warehouse — not as intimate as the meeting with the Black Students — where only men are allowed, resembles a religious ritual, where a type of baptism happens. David Duke preaches in a laughable way to the audience, using solid and ceremonious tones. Upon removing their white hoods to receive what is for them a 'holy water,' these men show their true identity: they are just cowards who hide behind white hoods and cloaks. While the ceremony takes place, Ron peeks through a small window, ashamed and afraid of witnessing the Klansmen shouting "White Power". At that moment, his eyes are the audience's, looking at a ridiculous but all-too-real ceremony.

As the film draws to a close, Felix and Connie's terrorist plans to kill Patrice ultimately fail. However, while Ron is trying to capture Connie, two other white cops show up and immediately assume that Ron cannot be a cop, and instead, is assaulting her. Only when Flip shows up and validates Ron's identity as a cop do the others believe him, proving once more the deep racism and white supremacy within the police force. There are three very satisfying scenes near the end: the one where Connie ends up putting the explosives in Patrice's car, ironically killing her own husband; the arrest of Landers — Ron's racist colleague who, not knowing he was being recorded, confesses his racist attitudes, and undoubtedly Ron Stallworth's last phone call with David Duke revealing to him who he had been talking to all this time.

Regarding Ron's story in the 1970s, it proceeds to a very dissatisfying result, bearing in mind that this is a film based in real-life events. Despite his investigation and the many accolades that he received for it; the investigation is said to be over. According to Chief Bridges, there were some budget cuts,

and the investigation on the Klan is not just no longer necessary as "there no longer appears to be any credible threats" (Lee *Blackkklansman* 1:59:46), as he also requires Ron to "destroy all evidence of this investigation" (Lee *Blackkklansman* 2:00:01).

While Patrice and Ron are having a conversation at Ron's house, they introduce a recurring theme in Spike Lee's movies. Should the racist system be fought from within or without? Should racism be confronted with a more peaceful approach, as the legacy of Martin Luther King Jr. taught? Or should it be fought more in a self-defense approach, as Malcolm X preached? Just as the argument develops, which suggests they are about to break up, someone knocks on the door and runs away. Ron and Patrice stop arguing, and together they arm themselves with a gun. This scene can well be read as a metaphor for the internal discussions that Black people have about the best tactics to fight against the oppressor. What the scene conveys is that ultimately it is the unity that makes them stronger.

Lee's famous dolly shot is enacted, and the couple armed with their two guns seem to be floating down a long hallway toward a window in a clear night sky. Once again, just as in Lee's *Malcolm X*, the use of this cinematic technique prepares the viewer for something terrifying that is about to happen. If the audience can only see Patrice and Ron's gaze first, by turning its angle, the camera shows the audience the same frightening vision that Ron and Patrice are having. In the middle of the night, a large cross burns at a distance, but its flames are very visible.

The scene is cut into the next. Closer to the Klan members, the audience sees them chanting in ritual form around the cross. As a Klansman watches the cross burn, he raises his arms, and in awe of what he is seeing, the burning cross is reflected in his eyes, as if he can see nothing but the cross and all the hatred it symbolizes. His raised head, looking at the cross, can be read as looking at the future ahead.

And then comes Lee's mastery and genius. While one sees hatred in the eyes of that Klansman in the 1970s, the film transitions to footage of another more recent historical moment. Here one can see and hear men shouting, "blood and soil" (Lee *Blackkklansman* 2:06:14), as they march with torches in the middle of the night. However, these images are not part of a fictional film but of actual events recorded on August 11, 2017, at the University of Virginia, Charlottesville, Virginia, U.S.A. During their march, the same men also repeatedly shout, "Jews will not replace us" (Lee *Blackkklansman* 2:06:27), while interrupting a Black Lives Matter protest by countering loudly with "White Lives Matter" (Lee *Blackkklansman* 2:06:41).

The footage continues to the following day, August 12, still in Charlottesville, where neo-Nazis carrying the swastika flag and others the Confederate flag act violently against protesters of the Black Lives Matter movement. While Trump's voice speaks of the incidents and mentions that "not all of

these people were neo-Nazis" (Lee *Blackkklansman* 2:07:18), Lee exhibits footage of a man carrying a swastika flag. Trump's speech is illustrative of the side he supports. By stating that: "you had a group on one side that was bad, and you had a group on the other side that was also very violent" (Lee *Blackkklansman* 2:07:10), one might ask, which "very violent" group was he referring to? To the B.L.M. protesters or the neo-Nazi and white supremacists? Throughout his speech, he goes on to say, "not all of those people were white supremacists. You've also had people that were very fine people" (Lee *Blackkklansman* 2:07:18).

The transition that Lee makes is very effective, as he switches the camera to David Duke himself speaking on the same day to a group of people, saying: "I believe that today in Charlottesville, this is a first step toward making a realization of something that Trump alluded to earlier in the campaign, which is, this is the first step toward taking America back" (Lee *Blackkklansman* 2:07:28). Exactly the rhetoric one can witness during the film and the consequences that it brought and is bringing about to U.S. society.

Finally, Lee makes a point of showing what happened at 4th street S.E. & Water Street on the same August 12 in Charlottesville, Virginia, with Black Lives Matter's protesters being ran over by a speeding car driving determinately in their direction. This terrible act of violence led to several people being injured and the murder of Heather Heyer, a white woman, who died on the same day. Lee chose to end his film with the site of her death and flowers around her photograph. On the front, a sign reads "NO PLACE FOR HATE!" As that scene closes, the inverted American flag appears, slowly fading into black and white.

4.3. Conclusion

One of Lee's goals is to challenge the perspective and opinions that people hold about 'race' and ethnicity, which, as argued earlier, are nothing more than a social construct. These goals are visible in several scenes, but the most memorable are the phone calls between Ron and David Duke, without the latter realizing Ron's skin color since there is clearly nothing that could identify him as a Black man. Lee wants to draw attention to how these same social constructions affect society and how specific power systems, like the police force, are complicit in perpetuating the dominant perspectives on 'race'or ethnicity and the continuing discrimination against certain people. This is illustrated in the scene where Ron wonders why the police themselves have done nothing against Landers (the racist cop), doubly demonstrating that while not all cops are racist they do exist and the system is very difficult to dismantle.

Another central goal is to parallel the Trump era and the global rise of extreme-right supporters. Even though it tells a story set in the 1970s, the audience understands that violence against blacks and

other minorities is still prevalent today. At the same time, the election of Donald Trump has validated the views and beliefs of white supremacy, shared by the K.K.K. and displayed in the film. Patrice and Ron's dolly-shot scene and the burning cross in the distance show that the investigation that Ron embarked on only defeated a small, almost insignificant part of a much larger system.

When, in the film, Chief Bridges announces they have "budget cuts" (Lee *Blackkklansman* 1:59:36) and that the investigation is done, it is illustrative of the small investment by the government and society in wanting to dismantle the Klan which can be read as a political failure and a major cultural failure of U.S. society. This lack of combat against white supremacists had predicted results; they continued to act, and worse, eventually became mainstream. The election of Donald Trump is but the development of this same lack of investment in education and the simultaneous neglect of these people, however foolish they may seem. The transition Lee makes from the 1970s to the present using footage of the white supremacists chanting proves that despite the time difference, not so much has evolved, and hate and violence are still very much expressed in the present day, resulting in events just like the one that happened in Charlottesville and more recently the attack on the United States Capitol, on January 6th, 2021, influenced by Donald Trump's white supremacist rhetoric.

Ultimately, the inverted American flag, a sign of extreme distress and danger, usually used as a military code, signifies the pain and division among the U.S. citizens during the Trump era. Furthermore, the change of colors to black and white is a metaphor for the racial division constantly ongoing in the country. Ironically, they are more complementary than oppositional; otherwise, the flag if disappear only one color stood out.

5. *Da 5 Bloods* – A War that was theirs too: re-evaluating the role of African Americans in the Vietnam war.

5.1. Popular culture and the Hollywood Vietnam war- "Do we get to win this time?"[21]

As an industry that is understood beyond mere entertainment, I have argued that Hollywood has served the interests of a part of a society in disseminating and framing a particularly biased historical narrative. In the same framework, Hollywood has also served the interests of the war industry by diffusing hegemonic ideas that engaged Americans with war and, consequently, becoming involved in real life. Geoff Martin's and Steuter Erin's commentary on this relationship of Hollywood and a call to arms that began with promoting public support for World War I, in the essay "Hollywood Mobilizes Support for the War on Terror", convey this interconnection:

> Once the United States declared war on Germany in 1917, the small film industry was "fully mobilized" to support the effort. Along with "heavy censorship," antiwar pictures were banned, cinemas became the focus for patriotic rallies (a war tax was placed on admissions), movie stars sold liberty bonds, and official propaganda films toured the country. Thanks to its wartime role and shifting geopolitical relations in Europe, World War I was the impetus for Hollywood's emergence as the world's preeminent film industry (100; quotation marks in the original).

From early on, Hollywood worked as a propaganda machine[22], once again creating romantic and noble representations about some Americans, seen as brave, courageous men, and following the tradition of distorting the perspective of the other, the enemy, seen as evil monsters. This theme became central in war films and continued in the 1970s and 1980s.

Again, one can question the veracity of these films and their relationship to historical accuracy. However, I want to explore how Hollywood and its representations of the Vietnam War have created what John Storey calls "Hollywood's Vietnam, which is interesting in several aspects, namely what Storey states as "Hollywood produc[ing] a particular 'regime of truth' about America's war in Vietnam" (Storey "The Articulation";quotation marks in the original).That is, how Hollywood constructed a

[21] "Do we get to win this time?" is a line taken from the character Rambo, played by Sylvester Stallone in *Rambo: First Blood II*, 1985 (directed by George P. Cosmatos). This line demonstrates both the will to win the Vietnam war, and the same inability to deal with the U.S.A's defeat.

[22] These are a few examples of war propaganda films: Thomas Dixon Jr, *The Fall of a Nation* (1916) whose main plot mocked pacifists; William A. Wellman and Harry d'Abbadie d'Arrast' *Wings* (1927), the first film to win the Academy Award for Best Picture and whose plot goes around pilots and soldiers in World War I; Howard Hawks' *Air Force* (1943), a war epic whose introduction words of "unconquerable heroism written in everlasting glory across the heavens" clearly demonstrate the romantic narrative the film wanted to convey. Within the good-war narrative, other films are included in the list, such as Jules White's *Boobs in Arms (1940),* Arthur Lubin's *Buck Privates (1941)* and *In the Navy (1941),* and Charles Barton's *Buck Privates come Home (1947).* Using both the noble cause and humor, these films "helped humanize the military, which assisted with recruiting during both wartime and peacetime." (Martin and Erin 101)

certain perception of the war that eventually became scrambled with the actual memory of the war and how the representations themselves called into question the concept of nationhood and patriotism —themes recaptured in Lee's *Da 5 Bloods* — how U.S citizens saw themselves, and how they made themselves seen to the world.

This concept of touching memory through media is what Marita Sturken delves on, in her book *Tangled Memories/ the Vietnam War, the AIDS Epidemic, and the Politics of Rememberin*g more specifically what she designates as "technologies of memory" (9). She claims that:

> Cultural memory is produced through objects, images, and representations. These are technologies of memory, not vessels of memory in which memory passively resides so much as objects through which memories are shared, produced, and given meaning. Memory is articulated through processes of representation. (…) the camera image constitutes a significant technology of memory in contemporary American culture. Camera images, whether photographs, films, or television footage, whether documentary, docudrama, or fiction, are central to the interpretation of the past. Photographs are often perceived to embody memory, and cinematic representations of the past have the capacity to entangle with personal and cultural memory. Just as memory is often thought of as an image, it is also produced by and through images (9-11).

If memory is also produced through images received by the viewer, whichever type she/he may be, Hollywood Vietnam can be said to have created its own way of remembering and creating a memory of the war and passing it on to its audiences. In this sense, all this war memorabilia propelled by popular culture helped preserve a specific image of the Vietnam war, so much so that the on-screen representations started to get tangled with the personal and collective memory of those, namely veterans, who lived through the actual war.[23]

War memories were created through different types of narratives perpetuated by the film industry. Moreover, it should be stressed that memory, and the different types of narrative it involved, were being created at a time of unprecedented change in the United States: converging with the Civil Rights Movement, the counterculture movements, new technological devices, from television to scientific progress that were allowing the U.S government to launch astronauts to the Moon, while

[23] A good illustration of this, with memories being real or supplanted by the screening of films, is the following testimony of veteran William Adams "When Platoon was first released, a number of people asked me, 'Was the war really like that?' I never found an answer (...) I also failed to find an answer because what 'really' happened is now so thoroughly mixed up in my mind with what has been said about what happened that the pure experience is no longer there. This is odd, even painful, in some ways. But it is also testimony to the way our memories work. The Vietnam War is no longer a definite event so much as it is a collective and mobile script in which we continue to scrawl, erase, rewrite our conflicting and changing view of ourselves" (Storey "The Articulation" 105).

also sending American soldiers to die in Vietnam. The narratives about the war kept changing throughout its duration and as the war became more and more widespread, opposition from American citizens, specifically young Americans who were either sent to war or watched their brothers and friends die or return wounded for life.

The Vietnam War represented so much in movie-theaters, would also be the first war filmed and played on television, entering every American home, adding another vehicle for the creation of a collective memory of the war[24]. Regarding the stories that "Hollywood Vietnam" created, the first narrative, still in the early years of the war, was supported by the military. John Wayne's *The Green Berets* (1968), a film released during wartime, was explicit war propaganda to call on citizens to enlist to Vietnam. Even though starring one of his most beloved authors, especially in the genre of Westerns, the film did poorly in the cinema, as it followed old formulas and conventions about war films.

As the war started to become very unpopular by the late 1960s and 1970s, the films changed their 'good war' narrative and had to learn how to deal with a war that was lost, and to "what Richard Nixon and others had called the 'Vietnam Syndrome'"[25] (Storey "The Articulation" 99; 'quotation marks in the original'). Vietnam revisionism followed two different paths that portrayed the Vietnam War as an American tragedy yet neglecting and forgetting the suffering caused to the Vietnamese people.

The neglect of the Vietnamese perspective comes in the Western cinematic tradition of representing 'the other' differently, constructing a set of identities that separated Western civilization from all others. In *Da 5 Blood*, one of Lee's innovations is the humanistic representation of the Vietnamese, something that is not typically seen in Vietnam War films.

As he stated in an interview with *The New Yorker* while shooting the film, the Vietnamese people themselves educated him about their memories and perspective of the war, saying to him that "We call it the American War" (Cunningham and Lee), pointing out their perspective on two different wars, stating to Lee that to them, "there was a French War, and there was an American War". Therefore he "was not gonna portray these people the way sometimes they've been dehumanized in other Vietnam films" (Cunningham and Lee).

Out of the general unpopularity about the Vietnam War came an anti-war narrative presented in films such as Francis Ford Coppola's *Apocalypse Now* (1979) and Michael Cimino's *The Deer*

[24] In the same vein, today's ways of watching have also changed. Streaming platforms have become another alternative to watch films. Lee's *Das 5 Bloods* is a clear example: it was released on Netflix alone, having no screening in movie theaters.

[25] As remarked by Storey, "Nixon did not coin the term, but he was a key player in giving it a particular political articulation. The Vietnam Syndrome began in the 1970s as a term to describe the psychological problems experienced by American Vietnam veterans (which also became known as 'Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome')" (Storey "The Articulation" 114, note 6; 'quotations marks in the original').

Hunter (1978), which focused on the horrors the war had caused to U.S. soldiers and families alike. However, despite the change from a 'good war' to an anti-war narrative, criticism must still be leveled at these examples, as they continued to show a skewed perspective on the war, focusing on it as an American experience alone. These films kept depicting the Vietnamese as "either stereotyped or portrayed as one-dimensional or rendered invisible; (…) all combatants are seen as equally culpable as part of a universal message; and these films often lack depth and provide little historical context of U.S." (Martin and Erin 104). Furthermore, these films made the suffering of the enemy invisible, and their own Black American veterans whose role in the war has been erased. Thus, as far as remembering goes, Hollywood also played its preeminent role in forgetting.

According to Storey, Hollywood deliberately forgets what seems most convenient, while maintaining a typical white male narrative, omitting information about gender and ethnicity, both of which played roles in the war. It also ignores the damage and atrocities committed against the Vietnamese population and the country. (Storey "The Articulation" 106). Moreover, these narratives tend to overlook the fact that the war was not on American land, neglecting the militaristic impact worldwide and on Vietnam itself, which causes Vietnamese people to continue to suffer to the present day, for example, when stepping on old mines scattered throughout the territory and left there after the war was over. "When asked about the possibility of U.S. reparations for Vietnam, President Jimmy Carter said he opposed this and famously said, 'the damage was mutual', even though Vietnam never attacked U.S. territory" (Martin and Erin 104). This more conservative voice comes alive in Lee's *Da 5 Bloods* through Paul's character (played by Delroy Lindo) who, when confronted with the My Lay massacre by a Vietnamese, claims that "there were atrocities on both sides" (Lee *Da 5 Bloods* 1:43:52).

Another type of narrative, which was not new in Hollywood[26], was creating war myths. These narratives, which emerged mainly in the 1980s, displayed, once more, a biased representation, creating different myths around the white man. These ranged from storylines about the lone hero to his victimization caused by innocence. These kinds of narratives appeared, according to Storey, from a sense of 'war as a betrayal' (Storey "The Articulation" 108), a betrayal coming both from the leaders themselves whose incompetence led to U.S. defeat, but also from the civilians themselves, who did not support the war and consequently those who fought it (108).

Understandably, these films[27] appeared side by side with Reagan's conservative administration, their cinematic ideology corresponding to the same image of American victory and greatness that

[26] As discussed in this thesis, *The Birth of a Nation* and *Gone with the Wind* are classic examples of creating one-sided myths about the war.

[27] The motif of 'returning to Vietnam' to rescue prisoners of war, according to Storey, can be read as a 'war as betrayal' narrative (Storey 108) and can be found in films such as Ted Kotcheff's *Uncommon Valor* (1983);Joseph Zito's *Missing in Action I* (1984), Lance Hool's *Missing in Action II-The Beginning* (1985), *Aaron Norris' Braddock:*

accompanied Reagan's campaign slogan "Let's Make America Great Again." These new myths tried to answer the reason why the U.S was defeated, escaping the truth and, as such, the pain of defeat. However, and perhaps of more interest not only for the fact that they are pure fiction but also for the attention they got from the public, the films about returning to Vietnam to save P.O.W.'s— Prisoners of War —fit the betrayal narrative formula, too. Among these films, the most famous is the *Rambo* series, in which a veteran green beret returns to Vietnam to rescue prisoners of war and tries to win a war that had already formally ended. The media attention garnered by the series shows the deep desire of Americans to win the war, the great difficulty that the country and its citizens had in dealing with defeat. On this feeling, Storey says that the "defeat is displaced by the 'victory' of finding and recovering American P.O.W.'s" (Storey "The Articulation"109). Lee brilliantly addresses the very making of these films in *Da 5 Bloods* (2020), where the characters criticize the '*Rambo* genre' and ask why Hollywood has not created films about real heroes:

> Melvin: Hey, y'all remember those fugazi Rambo movies?
> Paul: Sly. I like them shits, man.
> Otis: You gotta be fucking kidding me, man. Him and that…. that dude, uh. Walker, Texas Ranger. (…) Out there trying to save some imaginary POWs.
> Eddie: All them Holly-weird motherfuckers trying to go back and win the Vietnam War.
> Otis: Yeah. I would be the first cat in line if there was a flick about a real, hero, you know, one of our Bloods. Somebody like Milton Olive.
> Eddie: That man jumped on that grenade and saved his Blood's lives
> Otis: And he was the first brother to be awarded the Medal of Honor in Nam. Eighteen years old (Lee *Da 5 Bloods* 00:18:32- 00:19:07).

Simultaneously, these films demonstrate another narrative that Storey claims to be the one of "the inverted firepower syndrome" (Storey "The Articulation" 109), which includes lone men against the Vietnamese military, who, even without the necessary equipment, get to win. This is of course yet another recreation of the myth of the white male hero, fighting the oddest adversities alone. The Rambo character of whom was immortalized in popular culture with his bow and arch fighting the enemy with ease, is an example. However, on this same narrative, Oliver Stone's *Platoon* (1986) also helped spread the idea of the "inverted firepower syndrome" while displaying American innocence as well. *Platoon's* movie poster alone represents it by displaying the character of Sergeant Elias on his

Missing in Action III (1988), Gideon Amir's *P.O.W.: The Escape* (1986), *a*s well as the famous Rambo series, namely Ted Kotcheff's *First Blood* (1982) and George P. Cosmatos *First Blood II* (1985).

knees, in a sort of Christ image, shot by a brutal enemy, while the caption underneath reads "The First Casualty of War is Innocence."

These films insistence on the myth of the white man created a false memory of the war that erased African Americans, women, and the suffering on the Vietnamese side. Both the films that served as propaganda and those that showed the horrors of war perpetuated a biased narrative, portraying war as an American white male experience, showing a brutal imperial narcissism on the American side.

5.2. Revisiting the Vietnam war period in 2:45 minutes footage.

The 'joint' begins as in typical Spike Lee style, with a series of footage that last for almost three minutes, and which work perfectly to get across the message he wants to convey: the madness of the times during the Vietnam war, both abroad and at home. Muhammad Ali's voice, recorded in Chicago on February 26th,1978, arguing about the Vietnam War works as a prologue to the message of the 'joint,' as his words initiate a theme that will be recurrent throughout the film: why should African Americans fight in a war and kill Vietnamese for a country that mistreated them and saw them as 'second class' citizens? Since they have been deprived of so many rights, how much more patriotic can African Americans be when fighting for the "big, powerful America" (Lee *Da 5 Bloods* 0:00:16)? "Shoot them for what?" (Lee *Da 5 Bloods* 0:00:18), asks Ali once again, asking when was the U.S., in fact, ever good for African Americans?

The continuous archival footage is a touch of sarcasm and mockery for this great, mighty 'America' and a parody for the politics of the current state of the 'M.A.G.A.' supporters. When was America great if the footage displayed shows the brutality committed overseas and social and political disturbance at home? The choice to play Marvin Gaye's *Inner-City Blues (Make me Wanna Holler)*[28] was not innocent and illustrated the suffering of African Americans, particularly during those times. Lee presents two alternative narratives during the footage display: the 'white' master's narrative and the parallel story of African Americans' struggle. While the white man is landing on the moon, a photo of a Black man holding a protest sign is shown, criticizing the amount of money spent on astronauts that could be used to "feed a hungry child for $8" (Lee *Da 5 Bloods*0:00:52). The use of footage is part of the story, and Lee's critique is already poignant on the issues he wants to criticize. While the U.S. is spending billions on a space race trying to win first place in the great war against communism, it

[28] Marvin Gaye's "What's Going On" (1971) was a groundbreaking conceptual album in the music industry that brought together a collection of songs centered on the point of view of an African American Vietnam War veteran, who, upon returning home, went on witnessing injustice and suffering. This song focuses on the powerlessness of urban Blacks, suffering homelessness, unemployment, and ultimately revealing their struggle to survive in an economy that excludes them.

simultaneously witnesses starvation at home and sends its youth, African Americans included, to die in the Vietnam War.

Malcolm X's speech, which follows, is not only another testament to the many Black voices claiming the injustices they have suffered throughout their history and the current relevance of their issues, but also another way of keeping them alive and honoring them. Malcolm X's statement roams the history of African Americans, speaking of the battles they fought and were never rewarded for, warning that "sooner or later their allegiance towards you is going to wear thin" (Lee *Da 5 Bloods* 0:01:04). While Malcolm X's speech continues in voice-off, Lee displays photographs that tell the story of African Americans: from Tommie Smith and John Carlos' protest at the Mexico City Olympics on October 16th, 1968, with their closed fist, to protests over unemployment, homelessness, and poverty, complemented with a picture of Black children in 1970s Harlem playing in a pile of auto trash. The images, once again add visual form to the song by Marvin Gaye, who continues to play "no chance/ To increase finance/ Bills pile up sky high/ Send that boy off to die" (Lee *Da 5 Bloods* 0:01:09).

High-profile Black activists continue to appear on screen, such as Kwame Ture, on April 5th , 1968, announcing that "America has declared war on the black people" (Lee *Da 5 Bloods* 0:01:15), as well as Angela Davis, who makes an appearance to criticize the war and warn that "if the link-up is not made between what's happening in Vietnam and here, we may very well face a period of full-blown fascism very soon" (Lee *Da 5 Bloods* 0:01:25). As Davis speaks these words, a history lesson is given, probably about issues no one has ever known, such as Operation Ranch Hand Vietnam/Cambodia/Laos between 1961-1971. The images of four planes dropping the chemical known as "Agent Orange"[29] show what "Hollywood Vietnam" failed to portray: the destruction of Vietnamese soil and the spread of the war to surrounding areas, namely Laos and Cambodia, ordered by President Richard Nixon. As Storey states, one of the 'details' that Hollywood Vietnam forgets is:

> The extent of US firepower deployed in Vietnam. Put simply, the US deployed in Vietnam the most intensive firepower the world had ever witnessed. Hollywood narratives do not feature the deliberate defoliation of large areas of Vietnam, the napalm strikes, the search-and-destroy missions, the use of Free Fire Zones, the mass bombing (....). In total, the US dropped three times the number of bombs on Vietnam as had been dropped anywhere during the whole of the World War Two (Storey "The Articulation" 106).

The continuous display of archive footage shows the audience the brutal horrors that the American troops did to the Vietnamese people, while Marvin Gaye's song continues to play. This juxtaposition allows to demonstrate what was happening domestically at the time of the bombing of

[29] Although Spike Lee refers to Donald Trump as Agent Orange, this is not, ironically, a reference to him.

Vietnam, as well as what was happening at home where widespread protest against the war was increasingly dividing the U.S. society. This contestation against the war, the student protest and the violence generated around it is highlighted in the footage, paired once again with Gaye's voice: "crime is increasing, trigger-happy policing" (Lee *Da 5 Bloods* 0:01:37).

About this student protest, Lee makes the audience take a critical stance and reflect about two infamous shootings during anti-war protests. The first, on May 4th, 1970, the Kent State shootings, about which the audience learns from the photo display of John Filo's famous photograph of Mary Ann Vecchio kneeling and screaming over Jeffrey Miller's body, minutes after the Ohio National Guard shot the unarmed student. Written over the photo, one can read "Murdered by the Ohio National Guard" (Lee *Da 5 Bloods* 0:01:40). But also, the photos and names of all four students murdered in the incident. The same technique is used to show what happened in Jackson State University on May 15th, 1970[30], the second instance, where two Black students were "murdered by Jackson and Mississippi State Police" (Lee *Da 5 Bloods* 0:01:43). The footage aims to show how the Vietnam War was damaging both those being sent to war, and a youth experiencing unstable times, both politically and socially, at the home front. The youngsters witnessed the end of an era with the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., saw brothers and friends sent to war, and were fearful of themselves being caught in the wrong lottery[31].

The violence of the images escalates, and as Gaye sings, "Panic is spreading/ God knows where we're heading" (Lee *Da 5 Bloods* 0:01:47), Lee turns to the Vietnamese experience, displaying the shocking and violent image of the of the Buddhist monk Thích Quảng Đức self-burning to death in ancient Saigon on June 11th, 1963, followed by the similar self-burning of Ho Dinh Van, on October 27th, 1963. One curious archival image also introduced is Ho Chí Minh, on June 1st, 1955, in North Vietnam, smiling happily at children. The American enemy, so poorly portrayed in ordinary 'Hollywood Vietnam,' is shown in a humanized way, in stark contrasting with a cartoon picture of President Lyndon B. Johnson (1963-1969), naming him a "war criminal" (Lee *Da 5 Bloods* 0:01:46). The instability in politics is exhibited with Lyndon Johnson's resignation to the Presidency, which led to Republican

[30] The Ken State shooting took place during a peaceful protest against the growth of the Vietnam war in Cambodia, which was considered a neutral land. The shooting killed four and wounded nine other students (Lewis and Hensley). The Jackson shooting, usually hushed up and unnoticed due to Ken's shooting days earlier was a brutal police response to a protest against racial injustice. The shooting killed two young black men and injured twelve other students. "Phillip Layfayette Gibbs, 21, a junior pre-law major with a wife, a child and a baby on the way, lay dead 50 feet east of the door. He had been hit four times. (…) James Earl Green, 17(…) a senior at Jim Hill High School, had stopped to watch the action on his walk home from work at a grocery store. He had been hit once in the chest" (Jackson State University).

[31] "The 1969 Vietnam draft lottery assigned numbers to birth dates in order to determine which young men would be called to fight in Vietnam" (Erikson and Stoker).

Richard M. Nixon (1969-1974), another presidency that marked the persistence of the war and its human cost.

However, the most shocking footage is the murder with a shot to the head of Nguyễn Văn Lém, a handcuffed Viet Cong member executed by South Vietnamese General Nguyễn Ngọc Loan. The violent black and white image is generally known to the public, but its live color footage is probably new. Lee explained why he resorted to film footage, in an interview with *The New Yorker*: "people [had] never seen that footage. They only saw the stills of the photograph. They never showed that. I didn't even know until doing research that there was moving footage of that. I just thought it was a still photograph" (Cunningham and Lee). The bottom line is that his frequent use of footage is intended to show the public history as it happened, rather than a typical Hollywood narrative that distorts and hides certain realities.

As the footage continues to run on screen, Richard Nixon's voice is juxtaposed with the Napalm bombing of children on June 8th, 1972, in South Vietnam. One can hear the president's resignation on August 9th, 1974, as footage of children running around, burnt by napalm bombing, continues to be displayed. The images convey not only the horrors of war but the utter incompetence of rulers who showed to be clueless on how to handle the war.

Before Lee shows the Fall of Saigon on April 29th, 1975, another Black voice, this time of Bobby Seale, speaking in Oakland, California on April 7th, 1968, comes to claim what is the central question also in *Da 5 Bloods*: where are the compensations to Blacks fighting for a country that denied them freedom and rights? From the Civil War to World Wars I and II, Seale talks about how the promises of freedom were continually denied, assertively stating that "in the civil war, 186000 Black men fought in the military service, and we were promised freedom and we didn't get it. In World War II, 850000 Black men fought, and we were promised freedom and we didn't get it. Now, here we go with the damn Vietnam War, and we still ain't gettin' nothin' but racist police brutality, etcetera" (Lee *Da 5 Bloods* 0:02:28).

The result of the war is given full stage next. In addition to the terrible death rate, the injuries, and the war trauma on both sides, the war caused a massive escape of Vietnamese who had no choice but to flee to the United States, which again Lee addresses by showing distressing footage of refugees trying to escape on crowded boats. On this massive flight at the end of the war, Takaki's words attest to the veracity of the historical footage presented and how it was all happening under terrifying conditions:

> Fleeing from death, frightened people rushed to get out of Saigon. From the roof of the American embassy, hundreds climbed frantically onto helicopters. Others drove to the airport,

> where they abandoned their cars with notes on the windshields "for those who are left behind." The refuges had no time to prepare psychologically for departure; more than half of them were given less than ten hours (412; quotation marks in the original).

These 2:45 minutes are an extensive prologue of combined footage , which serves as a documentary to provide audiences with a perspective and knowledge of certain facts that will form the basis for the story that, although fictional (unlike the former two films I analyzed) could well be real, both in terms of depicting the African American experience in the Vietnam War, as well as providing a new perspective, in this case, from the Vietnamese side.

5.3. *Da 5 Bloods,* a message of hope or despair?

From 1975 Saigon, the audience is transported to the exact location, but in 2020. The letters of a hotel that read Majestic remain, but Saigon no longer exists. The city's name has changed to Ho Chi Min City, only proving the U.S. defeat — at least in the war. The 'joint,' features a simple plot: "Four African American Veterans return to Vietnam decades after the war to find their squad leader's remains — and a stash of buried gold" (Lee *Da 5 Bloods*).

As it begins, the audience is introduced to four of the five "Bloods," war veterans, who meet in a hotel lobby: Paul (Delroy Lindo), Eddie (Norm Lewis), Otis (Clarke Peters), Melvin (Isiah Whitlock Jr.), and David (Jonathan Majors) Paul's son, who will make his appearance later. For the more attentive, the choice of names coincides with that of the members of the band The Temptations, perhaps not only to bring in Black musical references but also to show how five men, though friends, can be tempted into not easily sharing the gold they are searching.

As in many of Lee's other 'joints', before the drama begins, Lee introduces his characters having fun, here dancing to Marvin Gaye's "Got to Give it Up" in a bar whose real name is Apocalypse Now — a way for Lee to pay homage to Coppola's 1979 film *Apocalypse Now*. This applies not only to the name of the bar but also to the use of Richard Wagner's "Ride of the Valkyries", also immortalized in Coppola's film, when American helicopters appeared in the skies to destroy a Vietnamese village. In turn, Lee's use of this song is not against the Vietnamese people, but when the group of friends, who recover their combat name 'the Bloods', are in a small boat about to begin their adventure.

During their conversation at the bar, early in the film, we learn that they ultimately return to Vietnam to get a 'lost treasure' of gold bars that they claim as reparations, since Blacks have historically been denied acknowledgement and compensation for centuries of oppression. Each of the characters has got his own reasons. For instance, Melvin needs the gold because has got an eighteen-year-old son, and he explains they wish to move out of the hood because they've got "thug-ass hardheads moving into [their hood]" (Lee *Da 5 Bloods* 0:06:34). However, Melvin's death is foreshadowed right

at the beginning when the Bloods discuss the actual Vietnam War heroes and refer to Milton L. Olive — the first African American soldier to be awarded the Medal of honor in Vietnam , who gave his life saving others by jumping on a grenade : "Look, I love y'all and all that bullshit, but uh, I ain't doin' that" (Lee *Da 5 Bloods* 0:19:23) says Melvin, who will end up doing exactly that to save Otis. At the end of the 'joint,' the purple heart and the two million dollars his family gets symbolize in fiction to the reparations that Black veterans never got.

However, the most complex of the Bloods is Paul, whom the audience learns has P.T.S.D. (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder), an illness he denies acknowledging. He claims that he sees ghosts, namely Stormin' Norman (played by Chadwick Boseman), to whom he says he talks (Lee *Da 5 Bloods* 0:47:25). Stormin' Norman, part of the five original "Bloods", is the symbolic representation of a typical Black preacher who guides the group, like Martin L. King and Malcolm X guided Blacks to affirm their identities as Black people. Like them, Norman, too, will be killed when he is still too young, leaving the same feeling of dissatisfaction about what he could still have taught. This killing though, happens accidentally. Paul shot him during an ambush by a Viet-cong woman — itself a very interesting depiction on Lee's side showing the role that women also had in the war.

This tragic event will be the main reason for the afflictions and the trauma of Paul's character who never tells the rest of the group that he had been the one who had killed their mate, a secret that he will take with him to the grave. Precisely because of this, the main difference in relation to the others, is that they "got back to the world"; they "made that transition" while he is "all...fucked up inside" and also "broken" (Lee *Da 5 Bloods* 0:54:05). To make his condition worse, he refuses help or to go to veteran meetings, claiming that he doesn't do that "sit in a circle, whine about shit group thing, man" (Lee *Da 5 Bloods* 0:54:59). Indeed, his life was not easy: he accidently killed Norman — not only a friend but a person who was like a God figure to him — hid the secret, did three volunteer tours in the Vietnam War and was not recognized for it. In addition, he also lost his wife at the birth of their son, causing a troubled relationship with David.

Consequently, Paul is mainly a man haunted by his past, filled with grievances and anger for the lack of recognition that he, and Black soldiers alike, got when they returned home and were called "baby-killers." On top of this, Lee created a troubled character as a Trump supporter, to the amazement of the other Bloods. In an interview to *Los Angeles Times*, Kevin Willmott, one of the 'joint' writers, claimed that:

> The thing Spike and I are trying to do with Paul being a Trump supporter is really get at the issue of grievances" (…). "I think grievances are a huge part of the whole Trump phenomenon. He's been able to reach people that feel like they've been screwed, and Paul's character has had such

a hard time on so many different levels that he just seemed like he would connect with all of that (Willmott and Rottenberg)

While talking in the same bar, a kid with an amputated leg and holding a crutch comes in and begs them for money, while calling them G.I. The fact that Paul cannot deal with the kid, wanting him out of the bar immediately, is only further proof of the denial he lives in, and how he cannot deal with a tragedy in which he had his part. In turn, the most reasonable of the four, Otis, gives the kid a twenty-dollar bill and takes on the consequences that war continues to have today, "It's a damn shame" he says (Lee *Da 5 Bloods* 0:07:17).

Paul's trauma is Lee's way to stress how Vietnam War veterans were mistreated when they returned home: "On the real man, we got back from Nam, we didn't get nothing but a hard damn time," says Paul (Lee *Da 5 Bloods* 0:07:27). Paul is a man forgotten by the 'system,' much like Trump supporters, filled with anger and with a sense of loss of recognition. White supremacy must once again be highlighted in how it extends to Paul, who does not even realize that voting for Trump, whom Lee mentions as the "Fake Bones Spurs President"[32] (Lee *Da 5 Bloods* 0:08:08), is in no way beneficial to him as an African American. When was 'America Great' for him? His people, and more specifically for the Black veterans? Nevertheless, he is the one who shows the most pride for his country, wearing everything from a veteran's to a M.A.G.A. cap while visiting the country where he was at war decades earlier and showing no sensibility towards the Vietnamese. The bottom line is that everything he wears and proudly exhibits only shows that his resentment is ultimately towards 'America,' an internal cry for recognition that he never got, and ultimately a broader message to the experience of U.S. Black veterans.

When Vinh (Johnny Nguyen), their local tour guide, shows up and teaches them how the "American war has turned the Vietnamese family against the Vietnamese family" (Lee *Da 5 Bloods* 0:10:38), the group gets a drink from Vinh's cousin, a former Viet Cong. Paul is the last to raise his glass despite the peaceful atmosphere, feeling compelled not to. Only Otis makes him acknowledge that "the American war is over" (Lee *Da 5 Bloods* 0:10:53). However, it will be by the end of the 'joint' that Vinh will also claim that "After you've been in a war, you understand it really never ends. Whether it's in your mind or in reality" (Lee *Da 5 Bloods* 2:12:22). For Paul, despite the passage of time, he is still at war, if not with someone else, at least with himself.

As they leave the bar, the kid with the amputated leg pranks the Bloods with firecrackers, triggering their memories that jump back in time to the war period. The first flashback of the 'joint'

[32] Donald Trump won this nickname for paying a doctor to give him a fake medical condition not to be drafted in the Vietnam war.

makes the Bloods revisit their memories, memories of 60 years old men tangled up, jumbled up, and blurred by time. In the 'joint', the actors do not look younger since, in fact, the memories provided by the film, are the memories that come to their minds in the present. Once again, Lee's technique is tied up with the concept of counter-memory and counter-narratives, representing history in more detail, by complementing it with the memories of these characters from both sides of the war, and thus confronting this plot with the historical narrative known and presented by the dominant culture. On these memories, Vinson Cunningham, the interviewer for *The New Yorker*, notes how the "flashback scenes (…) take the movie into a sort of magical space" and how "those scenes seem like dreams," and Lee replies that "it was, to them — it was going back in their memory. And, I might add, a bad dream" (Cunningham and Lee).

According to Lee, the width and height of the 'joint's image also changes on purpose; Lee wanted it to be very similar to his memory of the war on tv. Therefore, he claimed that "when we shot Super 16, it was exactly like the stuff I saw on television. That's the same cameras, same stock I saw on my television. The Vietnam War was the first war that was televised in American homes. And, also, it always lets the audience know: 16-millimeter, we're in a flashback" (Cunningham and Lee). The flashback scene serves to introduce the technique to the audience, represent the African Americans who served in the war, and introduce the film's plot: the helicopter in which they flew and crashed has a box full of gold bars to be given to another beneficiary. The image dimension ends when the flashback scene ends and returns to the original 'joint.'

However, even if the U.S. did not win the war, American Imperialism got the best of it by establishing and expanding in the new Ho Chi Minh City with the spread of American food trade chains, much to the surprise of the Bloods. Eddie says that "they didn't need us. They should've just sent Mickey D's, Pizza Hut and The Colonel [33], and we would have defeated the V.C. in one week." (Lee *Da 5 Bloods* 0:17:42)."

As in all Lee's films, *Da 5 Bloods* is also filled with relevant issues. Besides addressing the topic of Black Trump supporters, the spread of American imperialism, and the general trauma of the war, Lee brings up another concerning issue that is not detected in typical Hollywood depictions: the Amerasian children—born to American soldiers and Vietnamese women, mainly sex workers, during the war—suffered doubly, for physically resembling the former enemy and for being children of women, who either for being a sex worker or for having had a child with the enemy, were excluded by

[33] "Mickey D's" is a short slang way to refer to MacDonald's, as well as "The Colonel" refers to Colonel Harland Sanders, the founder of the food chain Kentucky Fried Chicken.

society. Although responsible for nothing, Amerasian children were another indirect victim of the war, having been affected at birth by the exclusion and disgust of their own society.

Otis has a daughter he does not know about, Michon (Sandy Huong Pham), with Tiên (Y. Lan). It is Tiên who states that their daughter suffers constant revulsion in her own country, both because Michon was "a bastard child of the enemy" (Lee *Da 5 Bloods* 0:22:34) and Tien, a prostitute. Additionally, Michon was not only the daughter of the enemy but, according to Tiên, "her father was a *moi*, the nigger. Everyone wants us out. The white G.I. taught us that word. We was too dirty to even clean the toilet. They call our beautiful Michon the cockroach." (Lee *Da 5 Bloods* 0:22:42, italics in the original). Michon therefore also accumulated discrimination for her skin color, suggesting that the racism of the white soldiers had been taught to the local Vietnamese.

With this story, Lee also introduces another aspect, the internal racism between the white and black troops during the war, greatly emphasized in the scene where Hanoi Hannah[34], a famous radio broadcaster (played by Veronic Ngo), announces to Black soldiers the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. by a white man in Memphis, Tennessee. As she speaks, her image is juxtaposed with archival footage of Martin Luther King's funeral and the protests of African Americans throughout the U.S.A. The speech makes Black soldiers consider who the real enemy is, the Vietnamese or the white man; It also brings in a crucial fact, the percentage of Black soldiers fighting in the war:

> Black GI, 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. Black GI, your government sent six hundred thousand troops to crush the rebellion. Your soul sisters and soul brothers are enraged in over one hundred and twenty-two cities. They kill them while you fight against us, so far away from where you are needed. Black GI, the South Vietnamese people are resolute against these fascist acts against Negroes who struggle for civil rights and freedom. Negroes are only 11% of the US Population but among troops here in Vietnam you are 32%. Black GI, is it fair you serve more than the white Americans that sent you here? 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 (Lee *Da 5 Bloods* 0:39:43).

The existent racism and segregation at home continued abroad, putting black and white soldiers against each other[35]. Upon hearing the news, the Bloods want to rebel against the white troops, "Got

[34]Hanoi Hannah was an actual historical figure known for her radio broadcasting during the war addressing American troops with music and propaganda in between, and mainly calling for their surrender.

[35] Although depicting World War II, Lee had discussed the same issue in another of his 'joints', *Miracle at St. Anna* (2008). In a very similar scene, the voice of Mildred Gillars, nicknamed Axis Sally (played by Alexandra Maria Lara), also a war propagandist employed by the Nazi party, appears to question the African American soldiers on the reasons to fight for a country where they are despised: "Guten morgen 92nd division, Buffalo Soldiers,

the wrong motherfucking enemy," says Otis, followed by Melvin, "yeah, goddamn white man gone too far" (Lee *Da 5 Bloods* 0:41:37). In his research, Lee stated that: "There almost was a civil war in Vietnam where black soldiers were getting ready to take up arms, and they would not be shooting at the Viet Cong. I Had four screenings of this film for Black and Puerto Rican Vietnam vets, that they were there. Each one of them confirmed this happened. Thank God it didn't" (Lee "How 'Da 5 Bloods'" 00:02:14).

Hanoi Hannah's character poses the fairness of African American service compared to white service is relevant to discussing patriotism. How patriotic can someone be to be willing to die for a country that hates them? Nevertheless, they still fight and give their lives for the same country! Therefore, patriotism takes on a very different nuance for African Americans as their relationship with America is one of love and hate.

Also, the issue of internal conflict within the African American consciousness reappears in this film, in the character of Stormin' Norman. Among all characters, he shows most awareness of being Black and of being in an unjust war. Stormin' is the one whom Otis says to have been "[their] Martin and [their] Malcolm" (Lee *Da 5 Bloods* 0:39:08), suggesting a balance between a more integrationist voice and a another for self-defense concerning the struggle for African American equality in the U.S. society. Stormin' Norman is the representation of a typical Black preacher, the one who, according to Otis, "trained [them] in the way of the jungle" (Lee *Da 5 Bloods* 0:37:13). The way he is presented, sat behind a palm tree, resembles a mythical God, who gave the Bloods "a direction, a purpose" (Lee *Da 5 Bloods* 0:38:55). Interestingly, he is also whom Otis says to have "taught [them] about black history when it wasn't really popular back then" (Lee *Da 5 Bloods* 0:38:59), and like other voices, namely Muhammad Ali to whom he is compared, Otis says that Stormin "schooled [them] about drinking that anti-commie Kool-Aid they was selling." (Lee *Da 5 Bloods* 0:39:02). Otis is hinting at how much propaganda his own country was selling to its citizens to make them patriotic and willing to fight in the war. Otis is also pointing out how Stormin' was the one enlightening them on the importance of not being fooled by this same political propaganda that sent them to a war in which Black soldiers were being decimated, a war in which they were being used "for cannon fodder," putting their "poor black asses on the front line" and "kill[ed][them] like flies" (Lee *Da 5 Blood* 0: 36:50).

In another interview, this time to *New York Times*, Spike Lee precisely makes the point on patriotism and the role of African Americans in the fighting for the U.S.:

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welcome to the war. (…) Why die for a nation that doesn't want you? A nation that treats you like a slave! Did I say, slave? Yes, I did! (…) Look around you. Do you see any white soldiers in the river next to you? Are they sending any white soldiers to die with you today? Of course not! (…) Think of the sacrifice you're making just for the privilege of being second-class citizens back home. Where can you vote?" (Lee *Miracle at St. Anna* 00:18:57 – 00:21:19)

> That's what this is film is about – how we, as descendants of slaves, have fought for this country from day one. The first person that died for this country in a war – the American Revolutionary War – was a black man, Crispus Attucks, at the Boston Massacre[36]. So, you can make the case that we've been more patriotic than anybody. And even today, we're still being shot down, choked to death, and people are marching all over the world, seeing the gruesome eight plus minutes of our king, king Floyd's life. And Black Lives do matter. Black Lives have to matter(Lee "How 'Da 5 Bloods'" 00:03:15).

From the point when Otis finds out he has a daughter, the action unfolds, and a negotiating room is presented in a more serious tone. To be taken into the jungle and to rescue Stormin' Norman's body and the gold bars, the Bloods need not only a tour guide but someone to help turn the gold bars into cash. Since France was the first colonizer and therefore shared a part of the guilt for the devastation of Vietnam, Lee saw this as the opportunity to bring French characters into the story. The first French character, Desroche (Jean Reno), is a French nationalist who will be the middleman to turn the gold into money. However, the tragedy centers on the fact that he is a man they should not have trusted, as he will set up an ambush to steal the Bloods' gold. The name seems to have been ironically chosen since *des roche* in French means 'rocks,' which is what he will get instead of the gold bars near the film's end.

In this same scene, Otis introduces the viewer to the mystery of the gold bars: the gold bars were meant to be given to the local native people, the Lahu, for their help against the Viet Cong – and the second flashback appears: Stormin' Norman convinces the Bloods to bury the gold and return later to collect it. The scene poses the question: to whom should the gold go? To the Lahu or the African Americans? Who is, if not more, at least as deserving of the gold?

> Stormin' Norman: We been dying for this country from the very get, hoping one day they'd give us our rightful place. All they give us was a foot up our black asses. Well, fuck that. I say the USA owe us. We built this bitch! (....) I'm saying we repossess this gold. We repossess this gold for every single black boot that never made it home. Every brother and sister stolen from Mother Africa to Jamestown, Virginia way back in 1619. We give this gold to your people!
> Paul: Reparations" (Lee *Da 5 Bloods* 0:26:50).

Another French character is part of the plot: Hedy Bouvier (Mélanie Thierry) is a resentful woman who feels guilty for her colonizing ancestors in Vietnam. Her role in Vietnam is for another kind

[36] 'Footnote added'. The same reference is made through the voice of Stormin' Norman, and Lee displays in *Da 5 Bloods* an illustration of the Boston Massacre on March 5, 1770, as well as a portrait of Crispus Attucks (Lee *Da 5 Bloods* 0:20:07).

of reparations, to try and repair what her family messed up. Her organization L.A.M.B. (Love Against Mines and Bombs), consisting of her, Simon (Paul Walter Hauser), and Seppo (Jasper Pääkkönen) locates and detonates Landmines that were placed in the ground during the war and continue to kill and injure new generations of Vietnamese. Through Seppo's voice, another criticism is made of Donald Trump and all those who support him. "You Americans are just incredibly uninformed. I guess you're too busy watching reality T.V. or electing a reality T.V. clown for a president" (Lee *Da 5 Bloods* 0:55:58). However, Paul, to whom the message is addressed, immediately backs down, stating that Blacks did not vote for him and that they all "plead innocent to all charges, claims, accusations, allegations, and associations connected to the Klansman in the Oval Office" (Lee *Da 5 Bloods* 0:56:17).

The first part of the 'joint' ends in an intercut to another setting, from a bar scene to the open jungle, which will begin to get narrower as the drama intensifies. However, before entering the jungle, the Bloods are led to the place by Vinh, whom Lee takes advantage of to question what freedom and the founding of the U.S. means for African Americans. Vinh says that "nothing is more precious than independence and freedom" (Lee *Da 5 Bloods* 0:57:43), a saying that the Vietnamese learned from "their Uncle Ho Chi Minh," much to Otis' surprise, for now, the enemy is considered an "uncle." The choice for this parental figure may be meaningful as an allusion to the figure of Uncle Sam, typically used also in huge propaganda and enlistment posters for wars, pointing at the citizens and saying, "I want you for the U.S Army". The Vietnamese uncle is explained by Vinh as "the father of modern-day Vietnam," in a comparison to the man who also freed the U.S. from British colonization by winning the country's independence, "like your George Washington" (Lee *Da 5 Bloods* 0:57:53), he says. However, Lee makes a point of mentioning how different the narrative is for African Americans when their parallel story about freedom and independence does not match the traditional American narrative, and Otis wants to make this clear, as he says, **"**my dear misinformed, misguided Vietnamese brother. Our uncle George owned 123 slaves" (Lee *Da 5 Bloods* 0:57:57). Once again, the value of patriotism is emphasized and the African American's connection to the typical American historical narrative too; how can they feel any admiration for a man who, despite his accomplishments, enslaved Black people? Again, Du Bois's "double consciousness" explains this feeling, a duality, an internal conflict in being Black in the oppressive society of the United States yet being an American.

The jungle entrance is marked by the acapella version of Marvin Gaye's "What's happening brother," with the Bloods singing along. Marvin Gaye becomes almost another character in the story, and the lyrics become part of the film's script and complement it. As they make their way through the jungle, David accidentally finds the much-desired gold. However, though initially celebrated, the appearance of the gold bars is the reason for the first rift between them as they wonder where the gold should be taken and with whom to share it. Eddie and Otis want to carry out Norman's will,

believing that the gold "should go to our people(...) that gold should go towards black liberation" (Lee *Da 5 Bloods* 1:14:18), as "Norman wanted that gold to go towards the cause" (Lee *Da 5 Bloods* 1:14:48). The friendship that bound them together begins to be affected by the sharing of the gold. Class issues enter the discussion, particularly between Eddie and Paul. Paul assumes that Eddie is rich and therefore "money don't mean shit to [him]" (Lee *Da 5 Bloods* 1:14:54). However, the audience learns that Eddie has lost everything but still wants the gold to go to Black liberation. His wish is granted, and at the end of the film, $2 billion is donated to a symbolic Black Lives Matter group.

Lee's intention to bring the experience of Black Vietnam War veterans, and thereby give them on screen the recognition they never got in real life, is epitomized in a very emotional scene, when the Bloods find the corpse of Stormin' Norman, and Paul delivers the speech of promising to take him back home. The scene closes with a prayer to Stormin' Norman to whom they thank for the "reunion of family, and friendship, and the brotherhood" (Lee *Da 5 Bloods* 1:21:29).

However, the brotherhood they thanked for soon starts disintegrating as the hot jungle and tiredness strike, and the temptation and arguments for sharing the gold among themselves start to arise. All the discussions culminate in Eddie's death, who blown up upon stepping on an old mine, preventing him from ending the saying "money is the root of all evil" (Lee *Da 5 Bloods* 1:24:54). Tiên's words were right on – "gold [did] strange things to people. Even old friends" (Lee *Da 5 Bloods* 0:33:09), as she handed Otis a gun so that he could be safe. The sequence of events is fast, as David also steps on a mine but survives because Hedy, Simon, and Seppo appear on the scene and help him get out of it alive. The same gun pistol Tiên had given Otis motivates the next part of the film, as it will force Paul Hedy, Simon, and Seppo to go along with them.

Their appearance will get the others involved in another side story. As Seppo escapes during the night, he is later captured by Vietnamese men hired by Desroche, who had been observing the Bloods in their quest for gold. Seppo's capture will be used to trade him for gold, a moment that comes when the Bloods meet Vinh, and are confronted with the ambush. This confrontation with the Vietnamese men comes to question further who is more deserving of the gold: the Vietnamese people, who had their country torn apart by the American war or the African Americans, who constantly fought for a country and whose efforts were never recognized? Once again, Paul becomes the scene's focus, asking the leader, Quân (Lam Nguyen), who he is[37]. Paul shows the worse of the U.S., both in its ignorance of

[37] Lee took the opportunity to make a cinematic reference to one of his inspirations: John Huston's 1948 *Treasure of the Sierra Madre*. When Paul asks Quân's identification, he says he is a "Vietnam officer." The dialogue develops as follows: "Paul: Oh yeah? Where are your official badges?" "Quân: We don't need no stinkin' official badges" (Lee *Da 5 Bloods* 1:43:12). In John Huston's *Treasure of Sierra Madre,* the dialogue is the following: "Dobbs: If you're the police, where are your badges? /Gold Hat: Badges? We ain't got no badges. We don't need no badges. I don't have to show you any stinking badges!" (*Treasure of Sierra Madre* 01:07:26)

the other and its refusal to acknowledge the atrocities committed throughout its history, particularly in Vietnam. Over this callousness, Paul's M.A.G.A. cap, which has become a symbol of The U.S.'s arrogance, enrages Quân, who establishes a very severe dialogue with Paul. "Do you know Calley, brother?" (Lee *Da 5 Bloods*1:43:22), Quân asks him. Paul's ignorance in confusing Calley with California is immediately corrected by Quân, who calls him an "imbecile," saying that "It's not a state," but about Lieutenant Calley. "Ever heard of Mỹ Lai?" asks Quân. Paul's expression of irrelevance, stating that "[he knows] all about My Lai" infuriates, as expected, Quân, who calls them all "G.I. murder, killer of innocent children and babies" (Lee *Da 5 Bloods* 1:43:33).

Once again, Lee uses footage, this time of the massacre, shocking images of murdered women and children, as well as an image of a baby with its mouth disfigured by bullets. The use of footage serves both to prove that Quân's words are historical fact and to display the atrocities committed by the U.S., namely the Mỹ Lai massacre, which is not mentioned in typical Vietnam War film narratives. The confrontation with these men eventually leads to a fight that kills Seppo, injures Paul in a leg, and kills three Vietnamese fighting with Quân, who drives away alone.

The most important at this point of the narrative is realizing that they have been betrayed by Desroche and must decide on a new plan. The lack of agreement causes Paul to part with the rest of the group. His solitary adventure into a more and more confined jungle is not a descent into madness but his most lucid moment. The famous monologue he speaks while looking at the camera while cutting down palm trees and trying to walk into the jungle is when the audience comes to understand his anger and the reasons for his frustrations. As Paul walks through the jungle, the *acapella* version of Marvin Gaye's "What's Goin On" accompanies him and the rest of the group who, lost on their way, take refuge in an ancient Vietnamese sanctuary.

Paul's solitary speech ultimately becomes his private moment to exorcise the demons that have constantly assaulted his mind. It is the final realization of the war trauma he has had, not only psychologically but also physically, as the audience learns that he is dying of cancer caused by the chemical Agent Orange, which Lee introduced at the beginning of the film. This gives Paul's character yet another dimension of pain:

> Paul: Their mind's weak. They got no intestinal fortitude. Ain't as strong as Paul. No, no, sir. Ain't got the guts Paul got. It ain't their fault. They was born weak. Otis and his ho. Car thieves, guttersnipes, chain snatchers. They ain't snatching my gold bars. Not Paul. No, sir. I ain't getting fucked again. Trying to fuck me with that salt in the Vaseline. Not Paul. Not this time. No. Them son of bitches. Son of bitches. Son of... Turned my own son against me. My own blood. God

damn. Well, we gonna see who's standing in the end. I don't care what the VA.[38] say. VA. don't know whit from Shinola. Worst fucking doctors in the world. Malignancy? Shit. You made me malignant. This fucking place here. Bathed me in that lymphoma Agent Orange herbicidal stew. Those army bastards scorched the earth with it. Sprayed that shit in the air and the water, my bloodstream, my cells, my D.N.A., and my motherfucking soul! But I ain't dying from that shit. You will not kill Paul. You hear me? Hear me. You will not kill Paul. And the US government will not take me out. I will choose when, and how I die. You dig? You couldn't kill me then, with three tours, you sure in the fuck can't kill me now. Right on? Right on. Right on. Right on" (Lee *Da 5 Bloods* 1:55:51- 1:58:22).

As he continues to walk, he has a series of misfortunes: he is bitten by a snake, falls into a ravine, and eventually gives up the gold that gets stuck in a tree. Stormin' Norman appears before him in a hallucination in which he believes to has been talking to God. More than gold, Paul seeks recognition and forgiveness from Norman for having killed him. Norman, immersed in light, resembles a mythical God, embracing and forgiving him while saying the words that Paul's soul always wanted to hear for his absolution "It was an accident" (Lee *Da 5 Bloods* 2:08:13). Paul's character can also be read as a broader metaphor for "America," hiding in the past and refusing to accept his guilt in Norman's shooting, finally seeking redemption. It may be a symbolic representation of how 'America' omitted some of the darker episodes of its history so that they would not be acknowledged, and responsibility would not be admitted. Paul is later murdered by Quân, not before finally understanding the brotherhood he shared with his friends and the inadequacy of war, as he sings along Marvin Gaye's "God Is Love".

When Desroche faces the group to collect his share, he puts on Paul's M.A.G.A. cap to show that they have killed Paul and to display his nationalism – how France has also made no reparations to its colonial past. A shootout starts killing Melvin as he jumps on a grenade to save Otis (a tribute to the real hero, Milton Olive). When Desroche approaches Otis to kill him, throwing his M.A.G.A. cap into Otis's chest, David, very accurate, kills Deroche with a shot to the head. Otis laughing and shouting "madness" is a wake-up call to all 'America', which was and continues to be immersed in madness and division.

The film ends in a reconciliatory letter written by Paul to his son, David, and as his letter is read posthumously, the audience gets to know the development of the story. Namely, a purple heart and two million dollars are given to Melvin's family. A statue to the veteran soldiers appears and also the Wall in Washington of the Vietnam War Veterans who died there. As Eddie wanted, his share of the

[38] V.A. is the acronym for the United States Department of Veterans Affairs

gold goes to a Black Lives Matter group that gets two million dollars cheering and shouting "Black Lives Matter," symbolizing the cause of Black liberation that he and Norman both speak of, making the connection between the struggles of the past and the struggles of the present. Another three million dollars as reparations go to the L.A.M.B. association given by the late Seppo Havelin's share. Vinh also got his share, having opened his own tourist agency, a symbolic way to repair the local Vietnamese people and the war-torn economy. Norman also returns home, his corpse awaited by his sisters at the airport.

As for David, he followed his path as a Black history teacher, which can be read as a hope sign for the future where the master narrative of history has eventually been paired with new perspectives. This is suggested by the many pictures of several Black figures who stand behind David (to name a few: Barack Obama, Toni Morrison, Nelson Mandela, Aretha Franklin), making one believe that David will continue the work of the ancestors who brought him there. Otis got his fix, repaired his past, and met his daughter. There is a fictional happy ending for both, a reconciliation that so many children born between American soldiers and Vietnamese women never got to have in real life. Lee's use of this typical dolly shot is a happy one here, as they both smile and seem to glide toward a happy future.

Even though the 'joint' seems to end on a positive note, by showing a war-time image of the five Bloods united with their hands joined, the sudden appearance of Martin Luther King Jr. footage on April 4th, 1976, creates puzzlement in the audience. As Spike Lee said about the footage used at the beginning and the end, "Muhammad Ali shoulders the prologue, and Dr. Martin Luther King shoulders the epilogue," (Cunningham and Lee) and the epilogue questions the public about the future of America, especially what will be the future for African Americans and everybody that does not meet the criteria of white supremacy.

The footage shows Dr. King reciting "Let America Be America Again" by Langston Hughes, a poem very similar to his famous "I Have a Dream" speech. It is a poem about how the American Dream of freedom and justice for all has not always rang true to all its people, Blacks, immigrants, poor whites, or Native Americans. Nevertheless, the poem still gives hope and dreams that one day 'America' will be the land that fulfills its promise, that one day it will meet its original dream of freedom, with King reciting one of its last verses, "O, yes, /I say it plain, /America never was America to me, /And yet I swear this oath/ America will be!" (Lee *Das 5 Blood* 2:25:49)

If on the one hand the footage of Martin Luther King Jr. reciting the poem gives an exciting hope for the future, the feeling is short-lived as it is cut short by dramatic music and red letters appearing on the screen to inform that "Exactly One Year Later To The Day Dr. Martin Luther King Jr, A Devout

Critic Of The Vietnam War, Was Assassinated In Memphis, Tennessee, In These United States Of America." (Lee *Das 5 Blood* 2:26:12). As Lee affirmed to *The New Yorker:*

> *Da 5 Bloods* has two bookends. One is Muhammad Ali. The other is Dr. Martin Luther King. Both were critics of that war, and both of them carried a great price. (…) Dr. King(…) when he came out against the war. He's talking against the war machine – big money. (…) So when he came out against the war, that was it. And the scene we have, his speech, which he gave at Riverside Church, April 4th, 1967 – he died a year later, to the day. He was assassinated because he was fucking with people's money. Big money. That's what I think (Cunningham and Lee).

The final scenes of the 'joint' leave a bitter feeling in audiences, showing that the struggle for equal rights has been marked by broken promises, and that the voices of hope have often been silenced forever. This may suggest fear and a general uneasiness to continue fighting against a system that seems to be unbreakable.

5.4. Conclusion

Lee's *Da 5 Bloods* deals with a subject missing in pop culture, and this is its significant contribution for bringing in a perspective and representation of the Black Vietnam War experience and taking down stereotypes about the Vietnamese that 'Hollywood Vietnam' has perpetuated. The search for the gold, although the central plot of the film, is not, in the end, the most exciting part. It is only a way for Lee to delve into other issues, such as Black patriotism, the promises of freedom denied so far, and to mention the duality African Americans feel while fighting for a country that denies them freedom. As Lee stated:

> From the get-go, Black women and men have been fighting for this country with the hope, with the prayer that we get our equal rights, that America would make its promise to its brothers, sisters, its ancestors stolen from Mother Africa in the first slave ship that was brought to Jamestown, Virginia, in 1619. It's always a promise, you know. It's the promise of this country, and that's why we've fought and died for the red, white, and blue (Cunningham and Lee).

This duality, so unique to African American identity and which has been argued here, is also felt from the beginning to the last minute, with the symbolic entrance of Muhammad Ali, a fighter and protester in contrast to the figure of Martin Luther King, whom Stormin' Norman's character closely resembles in advocating for peace among the 5 Bloods. Furthermore, his own dream of sharing the gold with the black liberation cause shows how much hope he had for "America," and that how it would one day fulfill its promises of freedom and justice for all.

However, the duality remains, along with the question: what hope is there for 'America'? Or is there only despair? Will 'America' ever live up to its promises? Is there hope, as more and more people

come together to shout, 'Black Lives Matter' regardless of their 'race'? Or will the other America, the one that invades the Capitol wanting to overthrow the rules of democracy, vandalizes George Floyd's statue, and elects Donald Trump as President, be the winner?

Da 5 Bloods, like all the other 'joints' does not provide answers, but it does what Lee wants, leaving audiences with pertinent questions that make them reflect on previously unthought-of issues. Furthermore, if his 'joints' aim to do just that, to leave audiences questioning reality as they know it, troubled by the present and intrigued about the future, *Da 5 Bloods* excels at all of that.

6- Final Conclusions

Throughout this thesis, I have argued how prejudiced representations centered on African Americans harmed this community and society at large. Based on so many stereotypes, that negative impact distorted their identities and their history as a community, damaging both their self-perception and how they were perceived by others

The main problem was how these representations created, as Spike Lee put it, a "false narrative" about the real origins of the U.S. and how it tied with the present reality. This reality was supported and constructed by a dominant narrative that disseminated its own perspective and denied the possibility that other stories be heard. At the same time, it allowed itself to tell stories that were not its own, twisting other peoples' identities, perceptions, and stories, in a power play that was only beneficial for themselves.

Pop culture played an important part in the circulation of these demeaning representations. African Americans felt ashamed to see themselves on screen, felt alienated from their body and skin color in their longing to comply with the dominant politics of beauty. This feeling of shame led them to follow the standards of what was considered "normal", as evinced in *Malcolm X*, showing how Black people submitted themselves to these standards. But, as Lee's films also demonstrate, popular culture can also present us with the reverse picture, highlighted in *Blackkklansman* when the characters accept and assert their natural beauty.

Although also belonging to popular culture, Lee's films propose to revise this "false narrative", as he calls these representations. Spike Lee's films analyzed in this thesis engage history directly in order to add crucial complements to it, deriving from those who have been made invisible or else oppressed and deauthorized within the master narrative of U.S. history.

With my study of *Malcolm X*, I expect to bring into evidence the story of a beloved African American leader, showing a more humanistic side of a figure whose radical messages of self-defense and self-love for African Americans scared the dominant culture's standards. If pop culture had distorted specific images, in this case, Spike Lee turned it around by positively representing a figure so cherished to African Americans. Lee reinscribed in the collective memory Malcolm X's values in terms of asserting his identity as a Black man who was proud of his ethnicity. Malcolm X's values were fundamental to the struggle and the re-vindication of civil rights and to remind us how the fight is constant, and his ideas are still present. The constitution of the Black Lives Matter movement in the new millennium evinces how the beating of Rodney King, shown by footage at the beginning of the film are still relevant in 2021.

Blackkklansman in turn, challenged our perception of the reconfiguration in the present of the same ideologies defended by the Ku Klux Klan. The comic and absurdist representations of the Klan's members are a warning call to the audience not to belittle what may seem ridiculous, and its actual dangerousness for a free, equal, and democratic U.S. society. By resorting again to footage and juxtaposed images of the 2016 election of Donald Trump and the hate march in Charlottesville, Lee draws a bridge between the past and the present highlighting how racism, hate, violence, and white supremacy persist in U.S. society.

Finally, *Da 5 Bloods* shows how limited the collective memory is regarding the Vietnam War, not only concerning the role of African Americans in the war but also the perspective on the Vietnamese side of the conflict, which Lee's usage of footage and the creation of Vietnamese characters allow the film to address.

Spike Lee's 'joints' I analyze, in its combination of film, photography, and footage are a popular cultural product that dismantles the old racist stereotypes and addresses and warns viewers about other cinematic and beloved filmic representation whose racist narratives can be hidden by its romantic apparatus, with the "white" gaze's stamp of approval. However, in a country where minorities are already becoming the majority, to have a single part of society be projected as symbolic and representative of the United States is to continue to agree with a perception that could not be further from reality. Spike Lee's 'joints' respond to an agenda that seeks racial justice in U.S. society, and that resonates well beyond the U.S society, as issues of racism and white supremacy cut across many regions of the globe. I firmly believe that society must begin to approach popular culture more seriously. At times linked to mass culture, where vain messages are 'swallowed' without any reflection, popular culture is an effective tool to turn consumers into agents, to give voice to unheard fringes of society and, as Spike Lee mentions in several of his 'joints', to "WAKE UP!" people for issues that could, otherwise, go unnoticed. As such, couldn't popular culture be instrumental to raising awareness about issues that are so difficult to address, even if banal? In terms of education, even in Portugal, shouldn't certain symbols that convey a biased narrative be the subject of a more profound discussion at school and in society? [39]

So that popular culture can be more fairly addressed, I conclude with the proposal that a bridge be established between the study of pop culture and the field of education. Not only for pop culture

[39] These questions are related to the fact that I could not help but look inside our borders in analyzing American pop culture. We cannot and should not forget how similar messages of hate and racism are found in Portugal, a country that witnessed the murder of a black Portuguese actor, Bruno Candé, on July 25th, 2020, exactly two months after the murder of George Floyd in the United States. The same racial hatred linked these deaths.

to be taken more seriously in the academic world but for changes in the educational system to be implemented in other levels of education as well, with the creation of modules that speak to our times, as well as in the training of professionals who know how to use pop culture as a teaching material. This cooperation between different fields of study could benefit society by creating new school subjects that better connect the classroom with the outside world, where products of pop culture abound. With my thesis, I hope to have contributed to a discussion that sheds new light on pop culture.

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