TRACING THE EVOLVING NEXUS OF RACE, SPECIES, AND “OTHERNESS” IN THE STAR WARS FILM FRANCHISE

A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of The School of Continuing Studies and of The Graduate School of Arts and Sciences in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Liberal Studies

By

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ABSTRACT

The Star Wars film franchise, due to its financial success, longevity, and prominence in popular culture, serves as an excellent media artifact for examining which ideas are popular and considered socially acceptable over a course of time. With Star Wars gaining its newest addition recently with the release of Star Wars Episode VII: The Force Awakens, and with more films scheduled to be added to the series over the next several years, the question must be raised: how have ideals on race and “otherness” manifested themselves throughout the seven canonical films of the Star Wars series, and how have changing social attitudes on those issues been reflected over the progression of the films of the Star Wars saga?

To answer this question, this thesis will examine both the main and ancillary characters in the seven canonical Star Wars films as well as the narratives in those films that carry statements or implications regarding the “other.” It will focus on characters, plot devices and cinematographic techniques which categorize people or things into the dichotomies of good or evil, beautiful or ugly, and familiar or “other,” and how those fall in line with dominant cultural ideals around the release of each film. The primary lenses through which these ideals are examined are those of race and
racial stereotyping, with resulting statements on gender, sexuality or geopolitics also being examined.

This thesis will show an evolution and discernable trajectory for how issues of race, ethnicity, and other forms of “otherness” are treated throughout the Star Wars series. It will show that quintessential elements of the Star Wars universe that have to do with race or “otherness” change over time based on critical reception of films or contemporary social movements, with some films being more problematic and some, such as The Force Awakens, being more progressive than others in this regard, and it will show how such a long-enduring film series must keep a delicate balance in the complex process of maintaining faithfulness to essential foundations of the Star Wars universe while simultaneously building upon it, especially when those narratives and foundations are rooted in paradigms that are biased.
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AUTHOR’S NOTE

Although the original title of the first released film in the Star Wars series was simply Star Wars, this paper will reference it within the text as A New Hope (an abridged version of the new official title it was given, Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope, upon the release of Star Wars Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back in 1981). This will be done in order to help avoid confusion and distinguish between references to the specific film and references to the film series as a whole. Usage of Star Wars within the thesis text will be reserved for references to the entire film series, except in cases where it is absolutely necessary to use the first film’s original name, in which case a note will mark and clarify such an instance. See the Glossary for the shortened and abridged terms for each particular Star Wars film.

Citations for A New Hope will necessarily use the film’s original title of Star Wars in order to point the reader to the proper source, even if A New Hope is used in the body of text.
GLOSSARY

*A New Hope* or **Episode IV**. Shorthand for the first released film of the franchise, *Star Wars* (1977). See the Author’s Note for more information.

*Attack of the Clones* or **Episode II**. Shorthand for *Star Wars Episode II: Attack of the Clones*.

*Original Trilogy* or **First Trilogy**. Episodes IV, V, and VI, released between 1977 and 1983.

*The Phantom Menace* or **Episode I**. Shorthand for *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace*.


*Return of the Jedi* or **Episode VI**. Shorthand for *Star Wars Episode VI: Return of the Jedi*.

*Revenge of the Sith* or **Episode III**. Shorthand for *Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith*.

*Star Wars*. The film franchise as a whole. See the Author’s Note for more information.

*The Empire Strikes Back* or **Episode V**: Shorthand for *Star Wars Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back*.

*The Force Awakens* or **Episode VII**: Shorthand for *Star Wars Episode VII: The Force Awakens*. 
CONTENTS

COPYRIGHT PAGE ................................................................. ii
ABSTRACT ........................................................................ iii
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS .......................................................... v
AUTHOR’S NOTE ................................................................. vi
GLOSSARY ........................................................................ vii
CONTENTS ........................................................................ viii
INTRODUCTION ...................................................................... 1

CHAPTER 1: CONCEPTS OF “OTHERING” IN SCIENCE FICTION FILMS .... 7
The “Colonial Gaze” and the Geopolitics of “Othering” ....................... 7
Beauty, Ugliness, and Erotic Desire for the “Othered” in Science Fiction... 11
Anxiety, Fear, and “Centering” in Science Fiction ................................. 19

CHAPTER 2: ESTABLISHMENT OF THE STAR WARS UNIVERSE ....... 24
The Rebels, the Empire, and Star Wars as Pro-American Narrative ....... 24
Aliens and Robots as Minorities, and the Whiteness of A New Hope ....... 29
Episodes IV-VI as Americanized Cold War Metaphor ......................... 34
George Lucas, Asian Culture, and Akira Kurosawa .............................. 38

CHAPTER 3: LANDO, YODA AND JABBA: WEIGHING HUMAN RACIAL
INCLUSION AND ALIEN RACIAL EFFACEMENT IN EPISODES V-VI ...... 44
Lando Calrissian and Race in the Rebellion ........................................... 44
Yoda and Western Romanticization of Non-Christian Philosophy ........ 49
Jabba the Hutt: Arab Ethnic Stereotyping Magnified in The Empire Strikes
Back and Return of the Jedi .......................................................... 53

CHAPTER 4: ALIENS, AMIDALA, AND ANIMATED ANTI-PROGRESSION IN
EPISODES I-III ........................................................................ 59
Racial Sci-Fi Slapstick, CGI Misuse, and the Jar Jar Binks Debacle of
Episode I ..................................................................................... 59
Amidala, The Trade Federation, and the Reemergence of Asian Cultural
 Appropriation and Stereotyping ....................................................... 67
Tattooine Revisited: Episodes I-III Doubling Down on the Middle Eastern Stereotyping of Episodes IV-VI

CHAPTER 5: A MODERN EVOLUTION OF RACE AND “OTHERNESS” IN THE NOSTALGIA OF THE FORCE AWAKENS

A New Studio Takes On Old Issues: Comparing John Boyega’s Finn to Billy Dee Williams’ Lando Calrissian

Rey, Amidala and Leia: The Evolution of Heroism, Sexuality, and Agency in the White Female Leads of Star Wars

Intergalactic Affluenza: The Evolution of the Toxic White Male in Star Wars from Anakin Skywalker to Kylo Ren

Maz Kanata, BB-8 and the Kanjiklub: The Other in Supporting Roles of The Force Awakens

CONCLUSION

BIBLIOGRAPHY
INTRODUCTION

The *Star Wars* franchise has enjoyed immense popularity over the last four decades, cementing the film series as not just an enormous economic success but also as a prominent popular culture artifact. Starting with the release of the acclaimed *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope* in 1977 and continuing with the recent box-office achievements of *Star Wars Episode VII: The Force Awakens*, released in December of 2015, the *Star Wars* franchise is estimated to have generated over $30 billion in revenue, spanning multiple media forms such as books, video games, television, and film spinoffs in addition to the numbered feature films.

Despite the *Star Wars* series being over thirty-five years in age, the release of *The Force Awakens* was widely anticipated, heavily marketed, and set multiple sales records. The first trailer posted online in November of 2014, more than two years ahead of its release, garnered 20 million views within 24 hours of its posting.¹ The Walt Disney Company, having acquired the rights to *Star Wars* with its acquisition of Lucasfilm for $4.06 billion in 2012², pushed an aggressive marketing campaign that saw *The Force Awakens* being promoted by *Star Wars*-branded products ranging from official *Star Wars* grocery store produce and a $3,999 bed for children to cosmetic

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makeup and high-heel shoes, in addition to a television advertising campaign that, as of December 10, 2015, reached over $66 million in American TV inventory. All of Disney’s promotion efforts paid off: *The Force Awakens* rushed to an all-time highest opening weekend sales record of $529 million globally.

Why do all of these economic figures matter, particularly when it comes to deciding on a media object to study? In short, it speaks to the sheer amount of exposure and presence a media object has as well as the high number of consumers who enjoy some aspect of the object. In addition, and perhaps most importantly, it also shows how the ideas and stories contained within that media object are found to be acceptable, entertaining, and able to be identified with personally by a very large number of people. If popular characters or specific lines or scenes from a movie enter into popular culture, the ideas and statements embedded within those characters, lines or scenes enter into popular culture as well. Thus, it is important to be aware of the statements contained within a popular media object, particularly if they have a specific relevance to modern issues of social justice or societal harmony.

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This thesis will address the statements and ideas within the *Star Wars* films specifically for this purpose of awareness. The seven numbered episode films will be the primary object of this thesis due to their nature of being the foundation for all media objects (such as books or video games) based in the *Star Wars* universe. Although this thesis may reference other *Star Wars* media objects to support its claims, those claims will be based on specific evidence from the films above all.

Given the impossibility of addressing the full breadth of statements and ideas within the *Star Wars* films in one paper, this thesis will place its focus specifically through the lens of statements and ideas regarding race and ethnic stereotyping. The study of racial representation and ethnic stereotyping also, at many points, uncovers many embedded statements on gender, sexuality or religion within specific races or ethnicities, and those will be explored as well, though gender, sexuality and religion in the films will not be the binding or primary focus of this thesis. Statements on geopolitics are also often revealed by looking at aspects of racial or ethnic representation, and given the span of time that the *Star Wars* films have been released in and the many significant events in world politics within that time, those political statements within the films will be examined as well, insofar as they incorporate racial and ethnic stereotypes in order to make them.

The study of racial and ethnic issues in *Star Wars* is nothing new. Indeed, there are very many essays, anthologies and papers dedicated specifically to the subject. Some writers posit that *Star Wars* is racially inclusive and progressive as a film series, while others disagree strongly with this assertion, and the merits of both arguments will be explored. Other writers have taken note of George Lucas’ (the creator of the
series) fascination with certain foreign cultures and his usage of those motifs in his films, and those evaluations on where he crosses the line between artistic expression and cultural appropriation is useful to this study. Where this thesis will differ is that it will not address the treatment of one specific race or culture in *Star Wars*. Rather, it will trace the evolution of such messages over the course of the seven films, drawing out the ways in which those messages are constructed and how they may change as a reflection of the times in which they were made. It will also evaluate the effectiveness of the films in delivering those messages, as while in many cases the characters or events of a film may point towards it wanting to make a particular statement, other aspects of the film or those same characters may detract from that statement’s effectiveness. Another differentiating aspect of this thesis will be its particular timing: with *Episode VII: The Force Awakens* being released so recently, as of this writing there are very few, if any, published academic writings that have been able to incorporate it into a study of *Star Wars* as a whole, and this thesis will dedicate significant space towards it as a very new and current representation of the *Star Wars* series.

In order to perform these evaluations, this thesis will begin with an overview of the intersection between postcolonial theory and the science fiction film genre. Though this overview will not be exhaustive, it will show how film demonstrates the importance of the concepts of viewer, perspective, and subject in regards to racial representation. The specific techniques of how science fiction artists create ugliness, beauty, eroticism, fear, and anxiety within the exotic or “other” will be shown in order to provide a framework in which evidence from the *Star Wars* films may rest upon.
The historical context of available filmmaking technologies is also important to this study, as advances in digital special effects and computer-generated imagery also greatly expands a filmmaker’s ability to create images and sounds that more closely match their artistic vision.

After outlining this framework in which science fiction film can be evaluated for its messages regarding the “other”, this thesis will then apply those inquiries specifically to Star Wars, both as a whole series and as pertinent to individual films, characters or scenes. One aspect of Star Wars that makes it stand out among science fiction franchises is the extremely high number of humanoid and alien species that are weaved into its universe, each with features that often borrow from or comment upon racial, cultural or ethnic groups or stereotypes of them. This complicated interaction between the spectrums of human and alien, human and machine, and the human spectrum of race will feature prominently in this section of analysis, as there are many instances in the films where racial commentary is coded within different alien or humanoid species and/or robots or cyborgs, making it less obvious. By examining these different depictions and interactions, this thesis will establish how these films either reflect tropes of popular culture of the time or show how the filmmakers respond to pressures and criticisms regarding that racial or ethnic commentary between the films. Those commentaries that will be addressed are varied and numerous, ranging from those addressing the aforementioned sexuality of genders within specific races, forms of art in the films such as music or dance that may reflect certain racial, ethnic or cultural groups, racial dialects, accents and linguistics, the exploitation of foreign culture as comic relief, the sexual fetishization and eroticization of non-white or alien
races, clothing, hair and makeup styles as representing certain races, and the attribution of certain religious practices to certain races or ethnicities.

Ultimately, this thesis seeks to provide a definitive statement on how representation of and commentaries on race and ethnicity morphs over time in the Star Wars series. It will show that the films reflect acceptable social attitudes and practices as well as social movements that are of public prominence in the times in which they were made, regardless of whether or not they do so with great effectiveness, and regardless of whether those attitudes and practices are considered today as progressive, oppressive, socially just, or socially unjust in their nature.
CHAPTER 1
CONCEPTS OF “OTHERING” IN POSTCOLONIAL SCIENCE FICTION FILMS

The “Colonial Gaze” and the Geopolitics of “Othering”

The relationship between imperialism and the science fiction literary genre is a close one, and given that science fiction is intensely concerned with imagining new places, often with different cultural rules or futuristic technologies, this closeness and the way the two ideas feed into one another is not at all surprising. Istvan Csicsery-Ronay notes that, when discussing which nations are historical producers of science fiction, “the dominant sf [science fiction] nations are precisely those that attempted to expand beyond their national borders in imperialist projects: Britain, France, Germany, Soviet Russia, Japan, and the US.”\(^1\) The development of science fiction in the literary histories of the aforementioned nations also happens to chronologically relate to their specific periods of imperialism as well. Western science fiction first surfaced in England and France as explorers and colonists from those countries were exposed to non-European cultures, and rose in prominence similarly in the United States, Russia and Germany as those nations respectively intensified their colonial efforts.\(^2\)

In addition to being chronologically linked with imperialist efforts, the characteristics of science fiction from certain countries tend to relate to the political

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and social issues specific to those countries as well. Initial American science fiction, with its fantastic portrayals of engineering, advanced machines and technological mastery, played well to citizens on the edge of the middle class who, as workers, immigrants or technical school students, could see the mastery of machines as a source of social power.\(^3\) By comparison, German science fiction written during the period of the German Reich, prior to and during World War I (1871-1918), was characterized by chauvinism and militarism.\(^4\)

Beyond just reflecting popular national attitudes, emergent science fiction also reinforces colonial attitudes due to the anachronistic structure of depicting anthropological differences.\(^5\) The fictitious depictions of encounters with another race or species, with either cultural or political norms that would be considered strange or different physical characteristics, inherently place those other races or species in different time periods. Perhaps those other races or species may be primitive, as if stuck in a past era, or perhaps they may be futuristic, with advanced and incomprehensible technologies, languages, or physical bodies that have undergone evolution to a state far beyond the imperfect human form.

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In either case, there is an important power structure in place in this type of storytelling, and that is what John Rieder has termed the “colonial gaze.”\(^6\) Rieder describes the “colonial gaze” as “the cognitive framework establishing the different positions of the one who looks and the one who looks at.”\(^7\) This is important because, as Rieder says, “the colonial gaze distributes knowledge and power to the subject who looks, while denying or minimizing access to power for its object, the one looked at.”\(^8\) Continuing, Rieder notes that this viewer versus subject structure is “a cognitive disposition that both rests upon and helps to maintain and reproduce the political and economic arrangements that establish the subjects’ respective positions.”\(^9\) The idea, then, is that whatever is fictitious or exotic is determined to be so in comparison to what the viewer, not the subject, considers normal. The labeling of the Other is a power move that simultaneously defines the boundaries of what belongs and what lays outside in the territory of the unfamiliar or different.

At the same time that this dynamic of “othering” and defining normalcy can perpetuate dominant ideals, so too can it be subverted and used as an effective tool of geopolitical criticism and social commentary. This criticism via view subversion can be done in many ways. First, the idea of the familiar, “normal” human person journeying to the land of the strange can be reversed, as in the case of H.G. Wells’ *The

\(^{6}\) Rieder, *Colonialism*, 7.

\(^{7}\) Ibid.

\(^{8}\) Ibid.

\(^{9}\) Ibid.
War of the Worlds, where Martians visit Earth and attempt to colonize human lands.\(^{10}\)

Or, perhaps, a failed human effort to conquer an alien culture might turn into a righteous indictment of modern social practices and politics, such as in James Cameron’s 2009 film *Avatar*.\(^{11}\) Or again, and perhaps most pertinent to this thesis’ scope, the freedom of science fiction can allow marginalized or outsider groups of modern culture to be coded into fictional species or beings, and the interactions of them with regular, “normal” humans can serve as a more palatable form of critique of modern social issues that might otherwise cause controversy if those marginalized groups were more explicitly referenced.

This third example of coding groups of people into fictitious species, humanoids, aliens, robots, and so forth is a double-edged sword. On one side, the prospect of having complex issues of geopolitics or social justice get elevated in social consciousness is a very good thing in terms of raising awareness and public conversation about them. The drawback is that, at the same time, when fiction does not explicitly reference groups of marginalized people as who they are, the authenticity of their identity is diminished and the complex struggles they face are sugarcoated. It is also very easy for science fiction to turn into propaganda through this method of species and/or race-coding. Giving the evil or enemy factions in a science fiction story the characteristics of certain ethnicities, races or nations is a way of exacerbating or

\(^{10}\) Rieder, *Colonialism*, 10.

\(^{11}\) *Avatar*, directed by James Cameron (20\(^{th}\) Century Fox, 2009), Blu-ray (20\(^{th}\) Century Fox, 2010).
perpetuating political tension and making discriminatory speech more acceptable or less recognizable.

**Beauty, Ugliness, and Erotic Desire for the “Othered” in Science Fiction**

When looking at the creation of alternate races or species in science fiction, and when trying to uncover the criticism or commentary woven into those new beings, it is important to be aware of specific methods that are used to depict those new beings in attractive, unattractive, familiar, unfamiliar, desirable, or undesirable ways. In other words, it is not enough to only know that one group of aliens is beautiful and another is ugly. Instead, knowing how they are beautiful or ugly provides the actual relevant insight into the social commentary behind their construction. Whether it has to do with the physical characteristics of a fictitious race or species, their social norms or methods of social organization, their fictitious religions or cultures, their language, or any other number of traits, there are certain things to consider, and certain tropes to look out for, that can help show just how the Other is made to be what it is.

A first thing to consider in this is whether or not the relationship between humans and the Other is adversarial or harmonious. If it is adversarial, then there are certain attributes and requirements of that adversarial Other that should be looked at for analysis. Patricia Kerslake describes these qualities of the adversarial Other as follows:

> It is…necessary for the antithetic Other to meet a number of conventional requirements in order for it to become a suitable adversary….‘suitable’ aliens must possess several qualities: they must embody an exoticism of form that renders them easily recognisable as Other; they must be dominated by at least one characteristic that can be portrayed as a negative from the human
perspective; and they must, in some manner, menace the human ability to
survive (this menace may take several forms, not the least of which is the
imperilment of the Earth, the human centre). Once clearly identified as
aggressive, or implacable, or too ‘different’ to coexist peacefully with an
enlightened humanity, then the Other becomes a legitimate target.....To create a
resourceful enemy, the alien is endowed with a varied and heterogeneous
degree of intelligence. However, it is rarely an intelligence that humans would
find incomprehensible and, most significantly, it is hardly ever an intelligence
superior to humankind’s. From a postcolonial perspective, the
misrepresentation of the Other is almost complete. The alien first exoticised
and distant, then identifiably different, has now become a quantifiable and
dangerous known, sufficiently intelligent to pose a danger but never sufficiently
superior to overcome the wiles of Homo sapiens.12

These qualities of the adversarial other that Kerslake describes are not only
identifiable in the physical sense, but they may also be embodied in other attributes of
the Other. The “exoticism of form”13 that she describes can certainly be a different
physical anatomy, but it could also be an exotic accent, social structure, political belief,
or cultural valuation. For example, the humanoid versions of the Cylons in the most
recent Battlestar Galactica television series are adversaries of the human colonists,
despite being physically indistinguishable from humans (and mimicking their biology
to an enormous, but not total, degree).14

That characteristic marking them as Other may or may not also be the thing that
Kerslake notes as the necessary “negative [characteristic] from the human

12. Patricia Kerslake, Science Fiction and Empire, Liverpool Science Fiction
Texts and Studies, 1st ed. vol. 35 (Liverpool, UK: Liverpool University Press, 2010),
19.

13. Ibid.

14. Battlestar Galactica, directed by Michael Rymer, aired December 8-9,
2003, on Sci Fi Channel.
However, I would go further and modify Kerslake’s point to say that whichever characteristics marking the Other as negative are judged so not just from a human perspective, but more specifically from the viewer’s perspective in the structure of the previously mentioned Colonial Gaze. An example of this that will be expanded upon greatly later on in this thesis is the Galactic Empire of *Star Wars*. The Empire is very much the Other, and a large part of that is their autocratic governmental structure, which, with the Emperor having absolute control over everything and having abolished the Galactic Senate, is constructed to be the antithesis of American representative democracy. This modification extends to Kerslake’s notation of that negative characteristic which also “menac[es] the human ability to survive”: perhaps it may be the survival of the human species that is threatened by the Other’s negative characteristic(s), but it can also be the survival of a specific way of human life that is menaced. In the case of *Star Wars* again, it would be the ability to live in a peaceful and free society under an acceptable form of government that is threatened by the Empire, not actually the survival of the human race as a whole.

The concept of the intelligence of the Other that Kerslake talks about is also noteworthy, specifically because the dynamic of comprehending that intelligence is one-way. The human (or the one who looks, if we are to return to the colonial gaze again) is able to understand and comprehend the Other’s intellect, but the Other (or the one who is looked at) is unable to comprehend human intelligence, marking it as


16. Ibid.
decidedly less than human. This is especially important in cases where the Other is human, as that disparity in intellectual power directly elevates one group of people over another. To round out the analogies to the Empire of *Star Wars*, this is done in many instances throughout the series when the Rebels outwit the physically, numerically, or technologically superior Empire forces. Instances such as Grand Moff Tarkin’s emphatic refusal to evacuate the Death Star paint the Empire’s leadership as arrogant and stupid\textsuperscript{17}, as does the defeat of Imperial forces on Endor by the Rebel-allied, teddy bear-like, rock and wooden spear-throwing Ewoks.\textsuperscript{18} Even Luke Skywalker’s apparent vindication of his belief that there is still good left in Darth Vader when Vader saves Luke’s life shows that those Rebel-aligned have the mental superiority to know the inner character of those with the evil Empire even better than they do themselves.\textsuperscript{19}

On the other end of the spectrum from the adversarial Other is the Other as a friend, or the Other as a human ally. However, though the casting of an alien other as friendly or good may seem progressive on the surface, the act of doing so ends up being counter to the most inclusive of intentions. As Kerslake notes, “For humanity to perceive the Other as friendly requires the SF [science fiction] text to produce an

\textsuperscript{17} *Star Wars*, directed by George Lucas (20\textsuperscript{th} Century Fox, 1977), DVD (20\textsuperscript{th} Century Fox, 2006), Disc 2.

\textsuperscript{18} *Star Wars Episode VI: Return of the Jedi*, directed by Richard Marquand (20\textsuperscript{th} Century Fox, 1983), DVD (20\textsuperscript{th} Century Fox, 2006), Disc 2.

\textsuperscript{19} Ibid.
appropriate image.”20 That appropriateness must be determined somewhere and by someone, and that someone is the human audience. The label of friend or ally, while not malignant, is still bestowed from the human-centric, or viewer-centric, perspective: it ultimately judges, at its foundation, whether or not the Other is compatible with society. Even narratives that would flip the traditional script by showing humans attempting to enter into friendly relationships with (or assimilate into) alien-dominant societies, rather than vice versa, still would reflect something about the alien societies as good or desirable according to our own preexisting values. In other words, we would still be ascribing something human-like or civilized in it, even if those possessing those positive attributes do not necessarily inhabit human bodies.

Another important concept to give attention to when uncovering commentaries within the Other relates to both adversarial and friendly Others: the erotic or sexualized Other. Science fiction, by its very nature, permits the exploration of practically any fantasy in its fictionalized worlds, with sexual fantasies among the most prominent of them. In fact, science fiction is particularly suited towards sexual imagination: when imagining a universe with different cultures, different rules, and different species, and where the restrictions and prohibitions of modern society might not exist, no sexual taboo is off the table. Leonard Heldreth writes:

Currently, a surprisingly large number of science fiction works portray men and women becoming involved sexually with aliens as they create fantasies, confront taboos (incest, bestiality, species miscegenation), and perceive the dangers of stereotypes. Authors who repeatedly explore this theme of sex with aliens include Philip José Farmer, James Tiptree, Jr., Fritz Leiber, and Theodore Sturgeon. Their works examine the sensual interaction of humans

and aliens at several levels of intimacy: temptation, sexual contact, and procreation of human-alien offspring.²¹

Although Heldreth’s essay is from 1986, the motif of humans having or desiring sex with non-humans in science fiction is still very popular in more recent science fiction films. Even with that the case, however, when looking at heterosexual encounters, the instances of human men having sex with female aliens are typically depicted in a much different light than human women having sex with alien men. The sexual conquest of female aliens by human men is often shown to be positive, heroic, or empowering. For example, in the aforementioned 2009 film Avatar, the protagonist, Jake Sully, gets to inhabit an artificial Na’vi body (the tall, slender, blue-skinned aliens of the movie), chooses the alien clan’s princess Neytiri as his mate (and in the act, steals her affections away from the clan’s greatest warrior to whom she was arranged to be mated to, an act of ultimate male sexual dominance), has sex with her, and eventually rises to the position of chieftain himself.²² Though these acts are done while Jake is mentally linked to a non-human body, there is one scene where Neytiri embraces his human body lovingly, making the interspecies romance explicitly accepted and understood before he permanently transfers himself to his artificial alien body at the end of the film, cementing his status as alpha sexual male of the alien society.²³ Another strong example of this human male/female alien sexual dynamic is


²². Cameron, Avatar.

²³. Ibid.
an assortment of scenes from the two most recent feature films of the *Star Trek* series, *Star Trek* and *Star Trek: Into Darkness*. In *Star Trek: Into Darkness*, the virile James Kirk is shown having a threesome with two beautiful twin alien girls with exotic skin markings, pointed ears and cat-like tails, and during the tryst, the two girls beg Kirk to return to bed with them as he answers a call, with their apparent craving speaking to his sexual mastery.\(^{24}\) Similarly, in *Star Trek*, Kirk is shown on top of a green-skinned alien woman in bed, kissing her feverishly, but as she professes her love for him, he hesitates, ruining the encounter and giving the impression that she is not an object for romance to him so much as a novel sexual conquest.\(^{25}\)

In contrast, the idea of women having sex with alien men is often shown in a negative light. In many cases, when a human woman becomes sexually involved with aliens, it is shown as an instance of rape, forced breeding, or an otherwise hostile subversion of female reproductive biology. Or, if it is a consensual romantic relationship, that relationship can lead to contention among others in the story. An example of the first scenario is the *Alien* film series, in which a recurring motif is unwilling impregnation of humans by aliens. In the second movie, *Aliens*, the protagonist Ripley and another girl, Newt, are plotted against to be unwillingly


impregnated and forced to smuggle alien embryos to Earth;\textsuperscript{26} in the third movie, \textit{Alien 3}, Ripley is forced to kill herself to destroy the queen alien embryo growing inside her;\textsuperscript{27} and in \textit{Prometheus}, the 2012 prequel to the \textit{Alien} franchise, scientist Elizabeth Shaw is unknowingly impregnated with alien offspring after her lover, Charlie Holloway, is given a drink spiked with alien DNA.\textsuperscript{28} An example of the second scenario of consensual yet problematic romance between an alien male and human female can be found in the aforementioned \textit{Star Trek} films. James Kirk, while able to sleep with several alien women in the more recent \textit{Star Trek} films, is rebuffed in his advances by the human Nyota Uhura, who instead chooses Kirk’s half-Vulcan friend Spock as her lover.\textsuperscript{29} Later, when Kirk is upset with Spock and in a conversation alone with Uhura, he refers to Spock as “your boyfriend,” highlighting their relationship over their professional roles, claims he wants to “rip the bangs off his head” (a derisive reference to the Vulcan male haircut style) and, upon learning that Spock and Uhura are experiencing relationship difficulties, asks “What is that even like?,” drawing attention to the Vulcan cultural practice of purging emotion in reasoning and prioritizing logic in all actions.\textsuperscript{30} The implication is that even a half-Vulcan would be

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{26} \textit{Aliens}, directed by James Cameron (20\textsuperscript{th} Century Fox, 1986). DVD (20\textsuperscript{th} Century Fox, 2014).
\item \textsuperscript{27} \textit{Alien 3}, directed by David Fincher (20\textsuperscript{th} Century Fox, 1992). DVD (20\textsuperscript{th} Century Fox, 1999).
\item \textsuperscript{28} \textit{Prometheus}, directed by Ridley Scott (20\textsuperscript{th} Century Fox, 2012). Blu-ray (20\textsuperscript{th} Century Fox, 2012).
\item \textsuperscript{29} Abrams, \textit{Star Trek}.
\item \textsuperscript{30} Abrams, \textit{Star Trek: Into Darkness}.
\end{itemize}
emotionally inadequate as a lover, and when Kirk and Uhura exit the elevator where they were having their conversation and walk past Spock who was outside the elevator door, Kirk whispers “Ears burning?” to Spock, a casually racist comment making reference to his pointed Vulcan ears.31 Though the group eventually reconciles, the contrast between Kirk’s acceptable casual flings with alien women and Spock’s rocky relationship with Uhura belies a difference in the ways genders are treated in alien-human romances, and the discriminatory comments by Kirk being framed as comedy show the human heterosexual male-tilted biases typical of science fiction narratives.

**Anxiety, Fear, and “Centering” in Science Fiction**

The creation of anxiety and fear concerning the Other is critical to the genre of science fiction. The very process of imagining a new, fictitious universe implies that, in any science fiction story, there is something different about that plane of existence than our own, and that difference is what both drives the power of the story and demands our judgement as an audience. Do we like that difference? If so, what do we like about it, and how does that reveal a need or desire of ours? Or, if we do not like it, which anxiety or fear of ours is that difference playing to?

In the case of anxiety or fear, an important concept to help us understand it is the idea of the center. Patricia Kerslake describes in detail how the center relates strongly to the Other as well as the Self:

For the Other to possess narrative power, it is vital that their position outside cultural convention is made manifest, since such a role is relatively weak unless it clearly represents difference. To successfully position a character as the Other


19
demands the *a priori* binary construct of centre and periphery, as discussion of the Other is impossible without a primary definition of the self, which, in turn, rests upon where we see ourselves located. If we inhabit the centre of our existence (our world, life, knowledge), then the Other, who cannot inhabit the same place, becomes marginalised by definition: they cannot be us. They are different and apart from us. They are outside.\footnote{Kerslake, *Science Fiction and Empire*, 9.}

Thus, one of the central revelations of science fiction is explained: the fictitious Other is just as much a statement on the Self than it is on those we consider different. Measuring that difference requires establishing where we see ourselves first (the center), and then exploring just how far the Other is from where we are.

That distance from the center to the Other can also be measured according to a multitude of metrics. It can be measured in terms of physical distance, in which case the measure of threat and resulting anxiety and fear can be determined. Is this a story that takes place here, explicitly? In Earth, or in any country that looks exactly like that of the author or audience? In our own city, or even a home we could see ourselves in? If so, then whatever the Other is in the story represents a greater threat by virtue of its physical proximity to the audience’s self. Its closeness to the physical center means, at the very least, that the author views whatever the Other stands for as eminently capable of changing the center that we hold so dear. At the same time, if the story takes place far away, or in somewhere unrecognizable and distinctly foreign, there is less of a perceived threat of physical takeover, and less fear. The Other does not represent as great of a threat or warrant such anxiety or fear if it is “over there;” contained, sequestered, out of our consciences and unable to affect us.
That distance from the center to the Other can also be measured culturally. If the Other is very similar to us in culture, politics, or social structure, then they are less concerning and more likely to be an ally than an adversary. However, if the Other adheres to a different political ideology, culture, or desires a social structure different than ours, the cultural distance is greater and the fear and anxiety that Other generates is greater as well. Two contrasting examples of this concept in play would be the android Data from the *Star Trek: The Next Generation* television series and the android David from the aforementioned *Prometheus*. In *Star Trek: The Next Generation*, Data is decidedly not human (his pale skin, colored eyes and speech patterns belie his machine nature) but because he is a strong crew member of his ship, follows orders, and strives to understand human emotion and the human condition, he is not a character that elicits uneasiness or anxiety because, even though he is definitively Other, he fits in with the audience’s cultural ideals and sympathies so well.33 In contrast, the android David of *Prometheus* elicits strong reactions of fear and anxiety, as we see him subverting the crew’s mission and undermining the perceived authority of the crew. He intentionally poisons the character Holloway with alien DNA and is shown to be the ally of the greedy and immortality-hungry Weyland, 34 and because we can see his misdeeds as an audience while the rest of the peace and knowledge-seeking crew cannot, and because his actions run counter to the cultural values of order and peace that we sympathize with, he elicits fear and anxiety in us as an audience.


34. Scott, *Prometheus*. 

21
Finally, a last metric for measuring the Other’s distance from the center is in how closely the Other physically resembles us. The methods of creating fear of the Other through physical differences in science fiction films borrow from some basic principles of a closely related film genre: horror films. When talking about creating credible threats (and thus fear in the audience) in horror films, Thomas Sipos writes the following about both the potential victim and potential threat:

A horror story requires sympathetic and vulnerable potential victims. For a threat to threaten, audiences must sense that sympathetic characters (preferably the principals) are at genuine risk of serious harm. An audience's perception of a protagonist's invulnerability (he cannot be seriously injured) and invincibility (he cannot lose) weakens the horror.35

Because audiences must sense that sympathetic characters are at risk, the best way to do that through physical differences in the Other is to make them so they are extremely different in their physical anatomy. The more different the physical body of the Other is than us, the more uncertain we are of that body’s physical and mental capabilities. If that body is strange or unusual, then we do not know how strong or smart it might truly be (though it might be shown outwardly to be much stronger than a human), and thus cannot form an accurate gauge of the threat it possesses towards us or the potential victim we are sympathetic to. That uncertainty creates fear and anxiety, whereas if the Other more closely resembles who we are physically or

resembles something we recognize, we feel more comfortable with gauging the existential threat it poses to us or the potential victims.
CHAPTER 2

ESTABLISHMENT OF THE STAR WARS UNIVERSE

The Rebels, the Empire, and Star Wars as Pro-American Narrative

Although it is given the designation as the fourth episode in the Star Wars saga, Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope was the first released film of the series, and as such had the task of establishing the fictitious universe that Star Wars was to take place in. However, it was not initially known that it would become the bedrock of such a prolific series: the iconic opening text crawl, while headed with the number and title of the episode in each subsequent Star Wars film, contained no such designation for the first film in 1977. The words “Episode IV” and “A New Hope” were edited into the 1981 theatrical re-release of the film in order to stylistically match the opening of the next film in the series, Star Wars Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back.1 Prior to then, the first film was simply titled Star Wars.2

Even so, A New Hope had to build its own universe to begin to tell its story, and the opening scene with the small rebel ship being pursued by the large, geometric, imposing Imperial Star Destroyer does an excellent job of establishing that universe’s ethos. The main hallways and interior scheme of the Rebel ship are a brightly-lit white, in contrast to the black paneling and flooring typical of Imperial ships, imbuing the rebel ship with a sense of righteousness and good before the audience knows

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2. Ibid.
anything about any of the characters. The uniforms of the soldiers on the Rebel ship are also very heavily Americanized and have a cowboy-esque style to them: they wear collared shirts, vests, calf-high boots, large and wide-brimmed hats, belts with large silver buckles, and wield pistols sheathed in leather holsters. Their faces are exposed, and the actors who get close-ups before the doors are blown open complete the stereotypical cowboy picture: male, white, gruff, some mustached and some blue-eyed, ready to repel the invaders. In contrast, the Storm Troopers that board the ship are given no such individuality or heroism. They are all exactly the same: covered completely in colorless white and black armor, flooding through the door in indeterminate numbers. Their faces are covered, and the permanent upturned scowl of their masks and the blank black stare of their covered eyes discourage the viewer from seeing them as individual people but rather as emotionless, indistinguishable, and dispensable drones. Already, for the viewer, there is no gray area: good and evil are clearly defined, and we know who we want to succeed.

This dichotomy is reinforced even more by our first glances at Princess Leia and Darth Vader. We know Leia is a princess already from the information in the opening crawl text, and her dress and makeup make her particularly angelic and set her up well for her part in the damsel-in-distress trope. She is young, white, wears pure white clothing, has glossy red lips and carefully dressed brown hair, and in the first two scenes where we see her, the music slows and then transitions into a soft flute melody, reinforcing the idea that we should think of her as soft, delicate, and vulnerable, even

3. Lucas, Star Wars.

4. Ibid.
though she has the fortitude to stand up to Darth Vader in their first encounter aboard the captured Rebel ship. In fact, the flute, chimes, and other lighter instruments become a consistent element of the score in several of Leia’s more prominent scenes: even in scenes of action, such as when she fires a blaster at Storm Troopers aboard the Death Star, the music alters when the film is focused on her. By choosing this music for Leia, the message from the film’s director to the audience is clear: think of her as prone to harm and in need of rescue, even in the many moments where she displays bravery and heroism.

Despite Leia’s self-assurance, the juxtaposition of Leia with the ominously powerful Darth Vader strikes fear into our hearts. Vader, in his kingly cape with his skin and body completely hidden, all black cybernetic armor, and imposing height, is evil incarnate. The fact that his physical characteristics are so different and hidden (exemplifying distancing from the physical center, as discussed in the previous chapter) creates fear in the audience: we know he is strong and powerful, but we do not understand him yet and we do not know what he is capable of. In fact, we do not even know at this point if he is wholly human, as his loud, robotic breathing accentuates the machine part of him. That lack of knowledge about Vader and the closeness of him to Leia instantly present Vader and what he represents as a danger to what we hold dear.

Leia’s first dialogue with Darth Vader also sets the stage for the film to become a metaphorical clash between American cultural ideals and perceived foreign notions of governmental oppression. She repeatedly invokes the Imperial Senate in her


6. Ibid.
argument with him, appealing to the moral superiority of the form of government used in America (representative democracy). She also speaks of her mission as diplomatic and peaceful, yet another moral appeal that an American audience would sympathize with. Darth Vader’s counters to her statements show he is more concerned with her loyalty to Imperial doctrine than anything else, and his subsequent imprisoning of her for daring to work against a tyrannical government is a strong appeal to American sympathies towards freedom fighters.

Soon after the scene with Leia and Darth Vader, the audience is introduced to another character central to the series and whom we are immediately sympathetic to as well: Luke Skywalker. To the average teenage boy watching the movie, Luke’s plight is all too identifiable: stuck on a farm in the middle of nowhere with an overbearing father figure and sympathetic but powerless mother figure, he is prevented from chasing his dreams by his circumstances and looks destined for a life of drudgery, boredom, and menial work. However, his following exploits to escape his situation follow a narrative sacred to the American public: the American Dream. Rising up from poverty and disadvantaged circumstances, he becomes a famous warrior and war hero, delivering the killing shot to the Death Star and cementing himself in historic lore. Though any prospect at romance with Leia is quashed later on due to him learning of their siblinghood, her affection and caring for him is clear in both A New


8. Ibid.

9. Ibid.
Hope as well as the subsequent episodes.\textsuperscript{10} To the same teenage boy who feels Luke’s pain early in the film, his subsequent fame, heroism, and winning of the affections of an attractive woman make for an equally identifiable fantasy.

Throughout the rest of the film, the marking of the Empire as the powerful threat and the Rebels as the determined underdogs is reinforced. The Empire has flashy technology and larger, more futuristic ships with more powerful weapons, while the Rebels’ arsenal and technology seems to be dated. The Empire has a giant space station, the Death Star, capable of destroying a planet with a single laser burst, while much of the Rebels’ technology seems unreliable and prone to breaking down, such as the multiple references to the Millennium Falcon’s worn appearance (Luke calls it “junk” upon first seeing it\textsuperscript{11}) and the bumbling droid C-3PO who proves useless or obnoxious on multiple occasions.\textsuperscript{12}

The creation of this fear of the Empire as well as the establishment of the Rebels as the scrappy underdogs who we sympathize is intentional, as it sets \textit{A New Hope} up to follow another one of the most cherished, well-known and beloved stories in Western religious tradition: that of David and Goliath. The Empire and the Death Star, like Goliath, were bigger, stronger, and better equipped. The Rebels, like David, were armed with much weaker weapons. However, like David again, the Rebels possessed more guile and wit, and with a surgical strike on the Death Star’s sole weak

\textsuperscript{10} Lucas, \textit{Star Wars}.

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
point, they were able to destroy it with one shot, much like David’s slingshot that fells Goliath with one well-placed stone.

**Aliens and Robots as Minorities, and the Whiteness of *A New Hope***

One of the noteworthy achievements of *A New Hope* was in its detailed portrayal of a very large number of humanoids, robots, and alien species. Indeed, the film won multiple Academy Awards for technical achievement and artistry, receiving the awards for Art Direction and Set Decoration, Best Costume Design, Best Visual Effects, Best Film Editing, Best Sound Mixing, and Best Original Score.\(^\text{13}\) In addition, the film’s sound effects and special dialogue creator, Ben Burtt, received a special Academy Award for creating the voices of the aliens, creatures, and robots in the film.\(^\text{14}\) In a time period before the technology existed to generate fully digital and computerized characters, *Star Wars* impressed audiences with its creation of this fantastical and believable new world. However, as many critics and writers have already noted, those fictional aliens, robots, creatures, and locations borrowed heavily from stereotypes of certain races, ethnicities, and cultures\(^\text{15}\) (though, as must be equally

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\(^{14}\) Ibid.

\(^{15}\) For a thorough analysis of these stereotypes, see Kevin J. Wetmore, Jr., *The Empire Triumphant: Race, Religion and Rebellion in the Star Wars Films* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company, 2005).
recognized, many of those writers also disagree on which exact stereotypes and/or tropes are being played upon with regard to specific characters).\textsuperscript{16}

The first planet that the audience is introduced to is that of Tattooine, Luke Skywalker’s home world, and in the portrayal of it and its inhabitants, many racial and ethnic stereotypes are played upon. Two species of aliens, the Jawas and the Sand People, reference Middle Eastern stereotypes. The Jawas are robed with faces invisible except for beady glowing eyes, speak in an unintelligible series of chattery phonetics, and make their living scavenging, dealing in stolen goods, and hustling unsuspecting customers (they attempt to sell Luke’s uncle Owen a malfunctioning droid).\textsuperscript{17} The Sand People, not encountered until slightly later, represent a take on nomadic Middle Eastern barbarians. Fully robed like the Jawas but wearing full, bizarre masks, the Sand People roam across the desert riding strange animals, attack those outside of their clan, and communicate by yelling in a series of animalistic and aggressive grunts and screams.\textsuperscript{18} Tattooine is a planet that Luke, our young white Americanized hero, may call home, but certainly does not belong.

The droids that Luke and Owen eventually purchase present a highly charged commentary on American race relations. While C-3PO and R2-D2 clearly have


\textsuperscript{17} Lucas, \textit{Star Wars}.

\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
personality and independent thought, they are also just as clearly thought of as sub-
human, and are stuck in an area of uncertainty as to their identity and social
acceptance. Many of their interactions early in the film as well as the language
surrounding them evoke strong recollections of chattel slavery and segregation, and
given the film’s timing in 1977, fewer than 10 years after Martin Luther King’s
assassination and with desegregation efforts still ongoing, the two droids are strong
examples as to how racial issues are coded within aliens and robots in the films. They
know they are being sold as property, yet they do not protest the transaction and
instead do their best to impress Owen, and do not react to his brusque and rude
treatment of them. C-3PO calls Luke “Master” and “Sir”, even after Luke’s request for
a less formal rapport between them, and when Luke and Obi-Wan Kenobi bring them
along to a bar in Mos Eisley Spaceport, the bartender shouts at the droids angrily,
waving his finger and stating “Hey, we don’t serve their kind here! Your droids,
they’ll have to wait outside – we don’t want them here!”19 This is strange, seeing as
how a large number of markedly different aliens and humanoids are mingling in the
bar together without incident (a scene that might easily be read as racially progressive),
and while C-3PO and R2-D2 proceed to accept their banishment without protest, it
does bear wondering how an audience would react to such a scene if C-3PO and R2-
D2 were people of color rather than robots.

The character Chewbacca and his relationship with Han Solo also present some
interesting commentary on the depiction of race and servitude. Chewbacca has a
personality and is intelligent, and displays a number of distinctly human traits (fear,

caring, and humor, such as when he is playing a board game with R2-D2 on the Millennium Falcon\(^{20}\). In addition, Chewbacca is able to speak, and though it is only in growls and grunts, his words are easily understood by Han Solo. Yet, at the same time, while other alien characters have their words translated into subtitles when pertinent to the story (Greedo speaking to Han Solo in Mos Eisley, for example\(^{21}\), Chewbacca never has his words subtitled, despite the fact that he speaks on a multitude of occasions. The audience only knows what Chewbacca says by how Han Solo responds to him: in essence, Han Solo has the power to both give and take Chewbacca’s voice from him. Chewbacca’s costuming is also curious: he is tall and strong, and his facial features seem to paint him as close to a great ape. Unlike many of the other aliens in the movie, however, Chewbacca does not wear any clothes.\(^{22}\) The accentuation of his fur-covered body as well as his primitive language seem to suggest that we are to see him as almost like a pet, even in the face of everything human-like he does. Chewbacca is fiercely loyal to Han Solo, who, like a pet owner, seems to have a unique understanding of him. Completing the dynamic, Han, with his freewheeling and risk-taking attitude, and cowboy-like vest, boots and holster similar to the rebel soldiers from early in the film, has command of Chewbacca come naturally to him.

One final point of observation that is important when discussing the coding of race within different alien species in *A New Hope* is one of the main criticisms of the

\(^{20}\) Lucas, *Star Wars*.

\(^{21}\) Ibid.

\(^{22}\) Ibid.
Every significant character in both the Empire and the Rebellion is white. The closest there is to a non-white main character in *A New Hope* is that the voice actor of Darth Vader, James Earl Jones, is African-American.²³ This casting choice bears scrutiny, as it means that the one pure black character in the movie gets a black voice. This also means that the entire story of the Rebellion is shown through white eyes: it is led by whites, carried out by whites, sacrificed for by whites, and ultimately the credit for success and the glory for the final battle end up going to all white heroes (reinforcing this, at the end of the film, Luke and Han Solo are awarded medals by Leia, but Chewbacca, C-3PO and R2-D2 are not).²⁴

This absence of actors of color not only forces any dialogue or commentary regarding race into the dynamic of human versus non-human, but also sanitizes it so that any commentary that may be provocative is less likely to generate visceral reaction. It is easy for an audience to forget the individuality of a non-human such as a droid or alien when they are mistreated, since they are not outwardly human, but when we see a human threatened (such as when Leia is approached by a robot bearing a needle aboard the Death Star,²⁵ a scene that will be investigated in the next section) it brings out much more anxiety and tension. It also means, given the coding of minorities into robots and aliens, that watching how the white characters interact with

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²³ Lucas, *Star Wars*.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.
non-human characters gives insight as to how the filmmakers want us to see those characters as interacting with racial minorities. From this, Luke’s comparatively kind treatment of C-3PO and R2-D2 show him as more or less of the white ally: one who is good because he does not participate in the negative behavior towards the droids that other characters sometimes do.

**Episodes IV-VI as Americanized Cold War Metaphor**

Much of the above analysis and description of the establishment of the *Star Wars* universe as well as the coding of race into species can be understood more thoroughly when placed in the context of 1977-1984 in America, where the films were written and produced. Many aspects of the films are meant to reference specific places or countries America was at conflict with as well as cultural ideals or movements that were prominent at the time of production.

The historical event that is perhaps most influential on the portrayal of both Empire and Rebellion forces is the Cold War. The Empire is constructed to resemble American perceptions of the Soviet Union and Communism, while the Rebellion is made to resemble America. This is shown not just through the story, but also through costume and set design as well as the score of the first *Star Wars* trilogy.

One of the plot devices typical of the representation of American/Soviet conflict in cinema is that of a spy infiltrating a government to obtain military secrets.  

In *A New Hope*, this is Princess Leia, who steals the technical plans of the Death Star and smuggles them back to the Rebellion, and later on in *Return of the Jedi*, this is Luke Skywalker and Han Solo, who use a stolen Imperial shuttle and password to bypass security systems and infiltrate an Imperial base. The recurring motifs of spying and stealing secrets reflects the battle of espionage going on between the United States and the Soviet Union as well as the once-prevalent fear of Communist agents or sympathizers in American society.

The Death Star itself exemplifies another typical representation of the Soviet Union in American film: that of what Nick Desloge terms a cinematic “doomsday device,” which would be a weapon of mass destruction in the hands of a hostile power capable of obliterating a nation or perhaps even an entire planet. Desloge draws a direct parallel between the Death Star and nuclear weapons in the Cuban Missile Crisis and how both generate similar fear in American audiences, writing as follows:

If there could be one distinguishing object within the original *Star Wars* trilogy, many would argue for the Death Star, just as many people would argue that the most important object in the Cold War was nuclear weapons, as both have the potential for massive destruction and create fear that permeated their respective worlds.

This fear of mass destruction plays double in reinforcing the portrayal of the Empire as the Soviet Union: not only does the threat of the Death Star emulate that of

27. Marquand, *Return of the Jedi*.


29. Ibid., 58.
nuclear weapons, but in *A New Hope*, the heavily Americanized heroes Luke Skywalker and Han Solo are the ones responsible for destroying it. When the second Death Star is destroyed in *Return of the Jedi*, it is Lando Calrissian piloting the Millenium Falcon who strikes the killing blow, and while this represents progress in the racial inclusivity of the *Star Wars* storyline (Calrissian being black and the only main character of color in the first three films, and who will also be the subject of extensive analysis in Chapter 3), he is still very much American.

Prior to their destruction, the interiors of the first and second Death Stars as well as the people and objects aboard them also evince imagery that references the Soviet Union. In *A New Hope*, when Princess Leia is about to be interrogated by Darth Vader, he summons a robot bearing a prominent needle that ominously floats towards Leia. The robot, a floating, spherical black probe, strongly resembles Sputnik, and the needle moving towards Leia generates a visceral reaction of anxiety. The thought of the large Soviet-like needle apparatus penetrating Leia’s sacred white American female body is gut-wrenching and appalling. Elsewhere around the Death Stars, the interior color schemes are austere and black. Meetings of high ranking Imperial military officials take place in comically large high-tech meeting rooms, and when one official voices opposition to Darth Vader, he is temporarily choked.

Darth Vader’s violence towards his own subjects fits yet another stereotype of Soviets in American films: a brutal and oppressive totalitarian regime’s harming of its


36
own people. This occurs not only in that initial meeting in *A New Hope* in which Darth Vader famously declares his disdain for the official’s “lack of faith,” but also in *The Empire Strikes Back*, when he kills one commander for a tactical error and another for allowing the Millennium Falcon to escape. In the second instance, there are even soldiers nearby waiting to dispose of the body, showing that such an occurrence is not only commonplace but expected and not disruptive to normal operations.

Rounding out the depiction of the Empire as Russia and the Rebellion as America are several discussions of government in *A New Hope*. Not only are references to the Imperial Senate spoken over by Darth Vader in his aforementioned encounter with Leia, but at the previously discussed meeting of high-ranking Empire officials where Darth Vader chokes an official, Grand Moff Tarkin triumphantly announces that the Emperor has dissolved the Senate and that fear of the Death Star’s firepower will keep the Empire’s subjects in line. Rule by military power is pitted against peace, and when we see the Death Star destroy Leia’s home planet of Alderaan, which Leia describes as being unarmed and peaceful, the threat of a militaristic and totalitarian government in comparison to a democratic one is made clear.

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33. Lucas, *Star Wars*.


35. Lucas, *Star Wars*. 

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George Lucas, Asian Culture, and Akira Kurosawa

Although the Star Wars universe is heavily Americanized, George Lucas’ creative inspirations are not solely American in origin. In fact, Lucas borrows heavily from Asian cultures and Asian films for his influences. In particular, motifs and scenes from the films of Akira Kurosawa are very prominent in the Star Wars universe, and Lucas’ depictions of Eastern religion, Asian martial arts, and Samurai culture heavily influenced multiple areas of Star Wars, including the construction of the Jedi order, the light and dark dichotomy of the Force, several action scenes, and the costuming of multiple characters.

References to traditional Asian dress and typical Samurai warriors’ clothing can be seen in the costumes of many of the main actors in Star Wars. In fact, when giving artist Ralph McQuarrie instructions for designing the Star Wars universe, George Lucas cited feudal Japan as a source for imagery,36 and on this McQuarrie delivered. Darth Vader’s helmet, with its flared neck covering and domed top, very closely resembles kabuto helmets typically worn by Samurai,37 and his mask resembles a mempo, which is a Samurai faceplate made for battle and to scare foes by looking like a demon or monster.38 Luke’s outfit on Tatooine closely resembles a gi (a

36. Wetmore, Empire Triumphant, 118.


38. Wetmore, Empire Triumphant, 118.
garment worn for martial arts training), while the elders Obi-Wan Kenobi and Yoda, in addition to their orientalized names, evince many stereotypes of the elder monk: they wear long robes, are visibly old, speak in lyrical utterances of wisdom, and are masters of the mystical knowledge of the Force. The lightsaber that Obi-Wan wields and also trains Luke in is very similar to a samurai katana, which is used with two hands. This is intentional: while filming *Return of the Jedi*, George Lucas instructed the director, Richard Marquand, to not let Mark Hamill (the actor who plays Luke Skywalker) use the lightsaber with one hand, telling him “You hold it like a Samurai sword.” It is also worth noting that the four characters mentioned here, who are given more Asian-styled costuming (in addition to the Emperor, who wears a black kimono-like robe), are also the ones all most closely attuned to the Force, while other characters such as Han Solo, who calls the Force a “hokey religion,” dress in more Westernized attire.

The foundational philosophy of the Jedi and the Force is strongly influenced by Eastern culture and religion as well. The Force of *Star Wars*, as Obi-Wan Kenobi explains it, is an “energy field created by all living things. It surrounds us; it penetrates us; it binds the galaxy together.” This construction of the Force is very similar to the philosophies of life and energy exemplified in Taoism and to the Qi of Chinese culture, where the Tao is described as flowing like water; able to encompass everything, and


40. Wetmore, *Empire Triumphant*, 118.

41. Lucas, *Star Wars*.

42. Ibid.
while weak on the surface, also able to conquer the strongest of obstacles in time.\textsuperscript{43}

Indeed, as Luke trains in the Force with Obi-Wan Kenobi and later Yoda, both instruct him specifically to feel the force “flow” through him.\textsuperscript{44}

However close the Force may resemble Taoism, though, \textit{Star Wars} does reveal a Western bias in how the story plays out. One aspect of Taoism that separates it ideologically from Western religions and cultures is that Taoism recognizes light and darkness as balancing opposite forces rather than placing a definitive supremacy on light. This is antithetical to Judeo-Christian religious philosophy, where evil is conquerable and divinity has no inherent flaws. Kevin Wetmore sums this up ably, stating as follows:

It is in the dualistic nature of the Force where Lucas comes closest to Western religious philosophy. While Taoism recognizes that good and evil, light and dark, are merely opposites in which balance must be sought, Western philosophy judges light to be good and dark to be bad. The yin-yang symbol is the embodiment of Taoism – both light and dark aspects are present and balanced. Western religious philosophy acknowledges a dualistic nature but one from which the darkness must be purged. Evil is seen as separate from good and must not only be resisted and rejected but overcome. The Dark Side is the result of Taoism being subjected to the Western concept of evil.\textsuperscript{45}

Thus, not only is the Dark Side the result of dominant Western cultural ideals being imprinted upon an Eastern philosophy, but so too are the heroic defeats of the two Death Star battle stations and the killing of the evil Emperor. The idea that light would prevail over dark, and that good would triumph over evil, is more in line with

\textsuperscript{43} Wetmore, \textit{Empire Triumphant}, 83.

\textsuperscript{44} Lucas, \textit{Star Wars} and Kershner, \textit{The Empire Strikes Back}.

\textsuperscript{45} Wetmore, \textit{Empire Triumphant}, 84.
Western religious philosophy, even as it is played out in Star Wars in a universe influenced heavily by Eastern philosophy.

This dynamic of Americanized actors inhabiting a space defined by its non-American attributes speaks to a complex issue: the tricky nature of walking the line between reasonable artistic license and expressing creative inspiration on one side, and outright cultural appropriation or racist exploitation on the other. Indeed, Westernized actors can make it more difficult to see commentary on Eastern ideals. Abigail De Kosnik writes:

To be sure, there is a colonizing aspect to Star Wars’s appropriating Daoism and other Asian signifiers. The film offers a fantasy of white culture employing and enacting Asian-derived philosophies and aesthetics without any hint that a translation or borrowing is taking place. By eliding the geographic, historical, and sociocultural differences between West and East, Star Wars, like all Orientalist texts, makes the incorporation of select elements of Asianness into Westernness seem natural.

Where Star Wars runs into trouble in evading claims of appropriation, then, particularly in terms of Asian culture, is that the films of Akira Kurosawa are so heavily referenced in the films that coincidence is virtually impossible. George Lucas has listed his favorite Kurosawa films as Seven Samurai, Yojimbo, Ikiru, and The Hidden Fortress, and while he has stated in interviews that Seven Samurai was the

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46. Daoism and Taoism are interchangeable romanizations of the same concept.


48. Wetmore, Empire Triumphant, 102-3
strongest influence of those and downplayed those of the others, examination of the films shows remarkable parallels in both plot and several individual scenes from *The Hidden Fortress* and *Yojimbo*.

*The Hidden Fortress* is set in a period of civil war, just like *A New Hope*, and follows the story of a princess who must reach a hidden destination, just like Princess Leia who must reach the Rebel base. The story of *The Hidden Fortress* is also told from the point of view of two lowly argumentative peasants, much like how *A New Hope* starts with the adventures of the two droids C-3PO and R2-D2, who quibble and provoke one another but still care deeply about each other. In *Yojimbo*, the character Sanjuro gets into a fight with several gangsters who boast about their history of violent and illegal behavior, much like the scene in *A New Hope* where Obi-Wan Kenobi is involved in an altercation with several arrogant and aggressive criminals in the bar at Mos Eisley. In *Yojimbo*, Sanjuro kills several and cuts off the arm of another, which the camera focuses in on. Similarly, in *A New Hope*, Obi-Wan wins the fight and cuts off the arm of the alien criminal who was harassing Luke, and the camera pans down to the bloody arm laying on the floor. In each case, it is clear that Lucas has a very strong affinity for Kurosawa’s work and wanted that influence to shine through in his own films.


However, his usage of those scenes and those plots with Westernized actors and politics is exactly the kind of incorporation that de Kosnik writes about: the story of *Star Wars* seems natural to viewers, as the non-Western origins of it are hidden. It is also exemplary of the concept of the “colonial gaze”\(^{52}\) mentioned previously. In an interview by Mary Henderson, Lucas described how he saw feudal Japan as exotic, saying: “…if you know about feudal Japan then it makes sense to you; but if you don’t, it’s like you’re watching this very exotic, strange thing with strange customs and a strange look.”\(^{53}\) What matters most here is the Western point of view from which Lucas is ascribing those labels of “exotic” and “strange” (and, by extension, labeling the society he would identify with as “normal”). Feudal Japan would not be strange to people from there, and when Lucas makes the choice to act out aspects of it with white actors, it both makes the story less “strange” to us and effectively hides any outright instances of appropriation that we may otherwise see.

\(^{52}\) John Rieder, *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 2008), 7.

CHAPTER 3
LANDO, YODA AND JABBA: WEIGHING HUMAN RACIAL INCLUSION AND ALIEN RACIAL EFFACEMENT IN EPISODES V-VI

Lando Calrissian and Race in the Rebellion

For all of its financial success, the whiteness of *A New Hope* did not escape contemporary social critics. Lois Armstrong notes this in a column for *People* Magazine in July of 1980, writing as follows:

No movie in Hollywood history has matched the combined artistic and commercial triumph of George Lucas' 1977 epic, *Star Wars*. But there were reservations from social critics. For all its ecumenical menagerie of creatures and droids, the film restricted its human heroes to white-bread types like Mark Hamill's Luke Skywalker, Harrison Ford's Han Solo and Carrie Fisher's Princess Leia. A few observers insinuated that, Chewbacca the Wookiee notwithstanding, the besieged Republic was not an Equal Opportunity Employer.¹

The fact that this was so readily acknowledged by critics is encouraging, but it also highlights how effective Lucas’ choice to whitewash *A New Hope* was.

Nevertheless, Lucas acknowledged the criticism of a lack of diversity in its human characters, and though the part of the new character Lando Calrissian in *The Empire Strikes Back* was not explicitly written for a black actor², he assigned the part to a rising African-American star, Billy Dee Williams. The above quotation is actually the lead-in to an article in which Williams extensively discusses himself as well as the issue of his race as pertaining to his character and *Star Wars* as a whole. When asked


². Ibid.
about his opinions on *A New Hope*, Williams acknowledges reservations, but also hints that his presence in the film is intended to be a marker of a more inclusive film franchise. Lois Armstrong quotes Williams as follows:

Billy Dee does not deny his qualms about the original *Star Wars*. “It was perpetuating the same old myths,” he says. But after meeting with Lucas and Irvin Kershner, who took over as director for *The Empire Strikes Back*, Williams softened his view. “Lucas wasn't trying to be a racist,” he figures. “He was just going with the old cowboy syndrome—the white hat/black hat conflict that creates drama.” Indeed, continues Williams, “What Lucas did in casting me was to make it clear that everybody is involved in the struggle between good and evil.”

The “white hat/black hat conflict” Williams is referencing here is the typical symbolism of early United States Western films in which white hats were typically worn by good characters and black hats were worn by villains. While it’s difficult to determine the intentionality of Lucas’ “perpetuating the same old myths,” as Williams puts it, the fact that Lucas made clear to Williams that the fight against evil was inclusive of everyone reveals that Lucas must have agreed with the criticism espousing a need for diversity among human characters in the films, and that *A New Hope* came up short in that regard.

This recognition of the need to make the Rebellion racially diverse then makes the character of Lando Calrissian a particularly important one to examine, as the decisions about how he was portrayed shed light on just exactly what Lucas and the


5. Armstrong, “Out of this World.”
directors felt they were including. Many aspects of Lando as a character are very positive and belie a progressivism behind Lucas’ vision for him: he is economically successful, inspires loyalty from his followers, and exemplifies bravery in combat. In *The Empire Strikes Back*, the soldiers in the front of the line in Lando’s personal escort are Asian and Black, which is a clear effort to show the diversity of Cloud City, the floating city that Lando is in charge of. Although his first impression on the audience is unfavorable (Han Solo describes him as a “gambler,” “card player,” and “scoundrel”), and his betrayal of Luke, Leia and Han Solo to the Empire leaves the audience questioning his integrity and motives, he nevertheless turns out to be a key figure in the success of their subsequent escape. Lando risks his own safety and urges Leia into the Millennium Falcon first while providing cover fire against Imperial soldiers, and when *The Empire Strikes Back* is about to end, he is wearing the same outfit that Han Solo is, which is another clear effort to link Lando with the bravery and heroism that we are accustomed to seeing with Han Solo. Happily, Lando does deliver on these promises of bravery and heroism: he risks his life by going undercover in Jabba the Hutt’s employ in order to rescue Han Solo, his promotion to General and tactical leadership during the final space battle of *Return of the Jedi* exemplify his importance to the Rebellion, and when he lands the shot that destroys the second


7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.

Death Star while flying the Millennium Falcon, he is symbolically elevated to the same level of both Luke and Han (he is piloting Han’s ship, and enjoys the same distinction as Luke in *A New Hope* of destroying the Death Star).

At the same time as Lando is successfully introduced as an overall positive character and new hero, there are also some scenes which detract from his character as well. In particular, his objectification of Leia is salacious and uncomfortable. When he first sees her as she debarks from the Millennium Falcon, he gives her a desiring look while exclaiming “Hello, what have we here?”\(^\text{10}\) Afterwards, while introducing himself, his vocabulary and tone of voice changes drastically from when he was talking to Han Solo: instead of the familiar friendly banter, he is much more formal and flirtatious, introducing himself with his full name and kissing her on the back of her hand. By not referring to her directly initially (asking Han about who she was with his first comment instead of asking her himself) and then fixating himself on her physical appearance, it is clear that Lando is more interested in her looks than any of her other qualities – which, given his casting as a black male and Leia as a white female, plays on an uncomfortable racial stereotype of the hypersexuality of black men and their supposed predatory desirability of white women in particular. When Lando enters Leia and Han’s waiting room, this pattern repeats: he immediately acknowledges her beauty before everything else and then tells her she belongs in the city among the clouds, as if her angelic beauty were the only thing that mattered in determining so.

\(^{10}\) Kershner, *Empire Strikes Back*. 

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This sexual stereotyping of the black male as desiring of (and therefore a potential threat to) the white female draws from a complex racial-sexual logic that goes back far in American literature, and in this case is accentuated by another shortcoming of the first Star Wars trilogy: the absence of black female characters in the films, which ultimately ends up marking the black male as racially normative.\textsuperscript{11} The uncertainty of Lando’s allegiances when we first meet him coupled with his romantic pursuit of Leia creates a narrative where he cannot help but be perceived as a threat by the audience. It is a double standard that Lando is forced into yet cannot come out favorably in: by this point we have seen Leia romantically linked to both Luke and Han Solo, and so if Lando does not show interest in her, he becomes less masculine than our white heroes. At the same time, if he expresses interest, he then becomes a threat to those same white heroes we are so emotionally invested in by this point. This is not to say that the addition of prominent black female characters to the story would instantly solve any issues of race in the first Star Wars trilogy: rather, it is to call attention to the problems that arise when only a single gender and single sexual orientation constitutes the entirety of the representation of a race in a narrative, especially when that narrative is in the context of such a charged and complex history as that of race in America.

Yoda and Western Romanticization of Non-Christian Philosophy

Though Lando as a heroic character is an overall positive part of *The Empire Strikes Back* and *Return of the Jedi*, he is not the only character that provides commentary on race. Indeed, as much as the two movies are to be lauded for emphasizing the racial unity of the Rebellion, they also warrant analysis for how they portray alien and non-human species as part of the *Star Wars* universe and expand upon the introduction to such kinds of aliens in *A New Hope*.

Although issues of racial representation among human characters in *Star Wars* were acknowledged and a direction of positive progression was taken with the inclusion of characters of color in *The Empire Strikes Back* and *Return of the Jedi*, similar issues surrounding the portrayal of aliens from *A New Hope* did not seem to get as much attention between films. Indeed, marking the Other in aliens became commonplace in the films, especially in *Return of the Jedi*.

The first major alien character introduced into the main narrative is Yoda, the diminutive green alien on the planet Dagobah that ends up being Luke’s trainer in the Force, succeeding the role Obi-Wan Kenobi once played. First introduced in *The Empire Strikes Back*, Yoda is a curious case: upon our first sighting of him, he starts off as friendly, but then immediately becomes a nuisance to Luke. Yoda rummages indiscriminately through Luke’s belongings, takes his food, and gets into a petty tug-of-war with R2-D2 over a small item, over which he throws a tantrum and starts hitting the droid with a stick, all the while concealing his true identity from Luke. During

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12. See Chapter 2 of this paper for a look at two of these alien races, the Jawas and the Sand People.
these scenes he laughs and grunts as he makes his mischief, and appears to be intended as a comic foil to Luke’s desires to further his training, all before telling Luke who he really is. As an audience, we are ready to believe the façade as well – after all, heroism and mastery of the Force, up until now, has only been in the hands of human (or potentially human, as in the case of Darth Vader) characters, and it is hard to believe that such a ridiculous and seemingly immature alien could be so important.

The arguments about Yoda representing religious or spiritual teachers from different cultures or traditions are widely varied. As noted in Chapter 2, Abigail de Kosnik argues that he shows many stereotypes of an Orientalized monk, while Andrew Bank writes that Yoda represents a Jewish rabbi in that both the method of his teaching and several of the key principles of Jedi training (starting young, respecting elders, and point of view as relative to truth) reflect those of Judaic religious education. Julien Fielding, referencing possible translations of the words “Yoda” in multiple South Asian languages (possibly a play on yoga, or the word yuddha, meaning “war” in Sanskrit) and “Dagobah” in Sinhalese (dagoba is the Sinhalese word for the Sanskrit term stupa, a dome-shaped building symbolic in Buddhism, which Yoda’s


home bears a significant resemblance),\textsuperscript{16} posits that Yoda is supposed to represent a spiritual teacher in the tradition of a number of South Asian religions.\textsuperscript{17}

Each of these cases have their merits, but the commonality among them is that Yoda, as both an alien in appearance and in his spiritual knowledge, is decidedly not on the same plane of stereotypical Christian American identity as Luke, Leia and Han are, and is therefore marked as the Other. Even Luke with his previous training in the Force does not immediately recognize Yoda as powerful, assuming because of his small stature, strange manner of speech, and apparent physical weakness that he could not possibly have the knowledge or mastery over the Force that his previous human teacher Obi-Wan Kenobi has, and therefore couldn’t possibly be the Jedi master he is searching for. It is a brilliant ploy on Yoda’s part designed to teach Luke immediately that, even as confident as he is and with his history of heroism and valor, he still has much to learn.

Yet, while Luke fails Yoda’s initial test, his subsequent insistence and adamant vows that he would be a worthy pupil of Yoda reveals another comment on each of these cultural representations of Yoda: that they hold some sort of power or mystical knowledge that Christianity or America does not have. Yoda becomes a figure that romanticizes non-Christian philosophies in a way typical of the counter-culture movements of the 1960s and 1970s in the United States. Abigail de Kosnik writes:

\textit{Star Wars} also encodes a different sort of encounter between the United States and Asia that took place in the 1960s and 1970s: the discovery of ancient Asian philosophies, especially Zen and Daoism, by Americans seeking

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\textsuperscript{16} Fielding, “Beyond Judeo-Christianity,” 27.
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\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
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alternatives to corporatized and commodified culture and the domino-theory interventionism of the U.S. military-industrial complex…U.S. sixties and seventies counterculture, along with more recent American “new age” movements, can be accused of similarly (mis)appropriating Asian cultural tropes while effacing references to the actualities of Asian nations and peoples and U.S.-Asian strife…

*Star Wars* thus records 1960s countercultural Americans’ belief and hope that, if Western modernity was so insistently on a path of unjustifiable warmongering, then perhaps the low tech of Asia—simple weaponry and decoys, and philosophies such as Zen and Daoism—could constitute an appropriate countermeasure to Western modernity’s most dangerous product, the nuclear bomb.  

Though de Kosnik frames this within her interpretation of Yoda as an East Asian monk, her point about Yoda and his teachings holding a special, heretofore unknown spiritual knowledge extend to any of the other possible racial or cultural identities Yoda may represent. Luke’s training exercises show that he too believes in the simplicity and anti-technological properties of Force mastery. Yoda has him run through the Dagoba jungle while hanging on his back, meditate, and balance rocks on top of one another while performing a one-armed handstand, using telekinetic powers in order to do so. How any of these exercises would help in defeating the Empire which wields lasers capable of destroying planets in a single burst and fleets of advanced warships capable of traveling through space at light speed is baffling, yet even as an audience we very easily see value in what Luke is doing because the mystery of the supposed knowledge that Yoda holds is entrancing.

Yoda as a character is also guilty of this effacement of the actual cultural and/or racial inspirations for his character: by making him a little green alien, the writers of *Star Wars* give themselves a blank canvas to play upon or mix whichever cultural,
racial or ethnic ideals or stereotypes they wish. This effectively obscures where their
ideas come from without due reference or credit to their origins, and also makes it
more difficult for them to face scrutiny over improper or appropriative depictions.

**Jabba the Hutt: Arab Ethnic Stereotyping Magnified in *The Empire Strikes Back*
and *Return of the Jedi***

The second major alien character introduced into the original trilogy is Jabba
the Hutt, who is mentioned by name in *A New Hope* and *The Empire Strikes Back*, but
does not make an appearance in the actual films until *The Return of the Jedi*. 19 In the
screenplay for *Return of the Jedi*, Jabba is described as being a “repulsively fat,
sultanlike monster.” 20 If Jabba were to be simply a grossly obese monster, he could be
styled in any number of methods, but the word “sultanlike” points towards an intention
of him being shown in the vein of decadent Arab rulers stereotypical of American
cinema. 21 This intent came through with many details supporting such a depiction: he
lounges on a giant throne on which the entirety of his immensely corpulent and slug-
like body is shown, he has attendants cooling him with palm fronds, he is seen inhaling

19. A deleted scene involving Han Solo and Jabba in Mos Eisley was revised
with computer-generated imagery and reinserted into the DVD release of *A New Hope*,
but the original 1977 theatrical release does not include this scene. At the end of this
scene, Han calls Jabba a “wonderful human being” as an underhanded insult, taunting
Jabba for not being human and implying that his own humanity gives him superiority.
See *Star Wars*, directed by George Lucas (20th Century Fox, 1977), DVD (20th Century
Fox, 2006), Disc 1.

20. Laurent Bouzereau, *Star Wars: The Annotated Screenplays* (New York: Del
Rey, 1997), 197.

smoke from a hookah-like device, he abuses his servants, he stuffs whole animals in his mouth to eat alive as drool and mucus is caked on his face (playing on a stereotype of Middle-Eastern and Asian foods as bizarre and disgusting), he is surrounded by sycophantic attendants (who are similarly gross, such as the pig-like Gamorreans), and he keeps women chained on leashes as if he were keeping a harem, with Leia’s hypersexualized wire bikini she is forced to wear exemplifying his desires for sexual conquest. 22 When he pulls Leia close to him aboard his barge and speaks to her at an uncomfortably close distance and tells her “soon you will learn to appreciate me,” 23 emphasis is put on his grotesqueness – his slimy tongue licks his lips and prods towards Leia as he holds a large dark beverage while she withdraws in disgust, marking him as the dangerously powerful hedonist who is used to getting what he wants from women, regardless of how disgusting he actually is.

Finally, the setting as well as the construction of his palace show a distinctly Muslim cultural influence. Tatooine, the desert home planet of Luke and Jabba, is named after the Tunisian town of Tataouine, and while the scenes were not filmed in Tataouine itself, they were filmed in Tunisia. 24 The setup of Jabba’s palace evinces Middle Eastern stereotypes as well, as Arabian flute-like music plays in the


23. Ibid.

background of several scenes, and the curved arches inside the palace and the minaret-like spire outside the palace are both reminiscent of a mosque.

Jabba’s penchant for barbarism and unpredictable violence is on display as well, and worth further analysis is one of the first shown victims of his cruelty: the alien slave dancer who resists Jabba’s pulling of her to him by the chain around her neck, only to be thrown by him into a pit beneath the floor to be eaten alive by a monster. The alien in question is of a species called the Twi’lek, marked by a human-like body with two tubular tentacles coming from the head instead of hair and any number of variable skin colors that do not appear in humans, such as pure white, red, green, or blue. Although this scene is not overly extensive nor particularly relevant to the plot, and although the alien dancer, Oola, only appears in this one scene, it became popular enough among fans to the point where Twi’leks became very significant characters in future Star Wars films as well as in licensed media such as TV shows and computer games. When the DVD editions of the original trilogy were released in 1997, Return of the Jedi featured a new and extended scene where Oola and an alien music and dance troupe perform an extended piece.


26. Twi’leks and their sexualized portrayal in Episodes I-III as well as other media artifacts will be addressed in Chapter 4.

Oola herself is a prime example of where a difference in species is substituted for a difference in race. Femi Taylor, who plays Oola, is a Nigerian-born black actress, and although her body is painted green for the part, her character’s reference to American black stereotypes and history is startling. She wears a slave collar and is tethered to Jabba by a chain (a reference to slavery that would be very off-putting if her race was shown) and the head tentacles her character has somewhat resemble long braids. In the 1997 DVD edition with the revised and added scenes, the music and dance scene Oola takes part in is revised to be much like one with a stereotypical southern African-American jazz band: the aliens play instruments resembling a keyboard, saxophone and drums, scantily clad alien women croon into microphones, and the new alien band leader sings in a deep, bluesy voice after rattling off a loud count to start the band’s song.28 Both Oola’s hypersexualized portrayal (she wears sheer netting as clothing) as well as the sexualized female aliens of the band’s chorus line demonstrate a sort of alien-ethnic sex fantasy reminiscent of the exoticization of non-white women. These women are entertainers and objects to be looked at and desired, and like slaves, they are not given their due agency as people but instead are considered disposable property to the point where Oola’s barbaric death on Jabba’s whim does not visibly enrage anyone. Just as in the case of Yoda, the fact that these alien women are not explicitly shown as representing non-white human women once again helps to soothe any qualms the viewers might have about watching such a scene and disinvites criticism towards the filmmakers for creating such characters.

The ethical quandary of Jabba’s subsequent death and the destruction of his pleasure barge at the hands of the main heroes (Luke, Leia, Han, Chewbacca, Lando, C-3PO, and R2-D2) is not really in his own death, but rather the opening sequence as a whole. It is a scene where Leia is physically and sexually threatened by the violent and evil Other, just like in her rescue from the Death Star in *A New Hope*. As Kenneth Wetmore points out, in our rush to see our human heroes succeed, we forget to question the ethics of the massive destruction caused. Wetmore writes:

> What crime have those on the sail barge committed that earns them the death sentence, other than the guilt by association by being with Jabba and that they are different – aliens? By what authority does Luke orchestrate this complex rescue, which will most likely end in the deaths of many people? Jabba is a racially different, inferior enemy, surrounded by other racially different, inferior beings, which is what makes it acceptable to kill them all and enjoy the spectacle of it.29

This is a very strong point, as many details about the scene point to it as heroic: the triumphant music and panoramic shot of the barge’s destruction and the escape of our heroes marks it as a clearly happy occasion. Also missing from consideration in the happiness of this scene seems to be the question of Han Solo’s character in the first place: he is set up to be the hero and a likeable one, yet he made his living working for Jabba, doing the criminal acts that Jabba tasked him with doing, and failed to live up to his contractual obligations. Han’s career as a criminal seems easy to forgive and forget when placed in contrast with the revolting Jabba, and it is easy to celebrate the poetic justice in Jabba’s manner of death (Leia chokes him with the chain he has tied her with) and enjoy the massive explosion of his barge, yet one must also wonder how

29. Wetmore, Empire Triumphant, 173.
many of his unfortunate and innocent slaves did not escape death and were not rescued by the heroes, dying along with him. As a Jedi, Luke is taught by Yoda to use his teachings for defense and peace, and it seems difficult to reconcile those tenets of Jedi morality with the widespread violence and death he causes in his return to Tatooine.
Racial Sci-Fi Slapstick, CGI Misuse, and the Jar Jar Binks Debacle of Episode I

The anticipation and hype leading up to the release of *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace* in 1999 was staggering. Fueled by a promotional campaign including a $2 billion partnership with Pepsico and a toy-making agreement with Hasbro that guaranteed $500 million in royalties,¹ eager *Star Wars* fans were ecstatic over the release of a new movie to add to the hallowed trilogy of Episodes IV-VI. According to CNN, fans had been lining up outside Manhattan’s Ziegfeld Theater for weeks to buy advance tickets,² and scalpers who managed to buy tickets were reselling them from around $9 to over $100 each.³ One report by an outplacement firm forecast that 2.2 million workers in America, an amount approximately equal to the population of Utah at the time, would be absent from work to watch the film on release day,


resulting in approximately $293 million in lost wages. Clearly, the public was excited to see such a popular, beloved and iconic film series revived.

Once the film was released, however, scathing reviews from writers coalesced into a firestorm of blistering, vitriolic criticism, aimed mainly at one of *The Phantom Menace*’s main yet most-hated characters: the digitally-generated Gungan, Jar Jar Binks. An essay by Dan North, pointedly titled “Kill Binks: Why the World Hated Its First Digital Actor,” compiled some of the more noteworthy quotes from famous film critics regarding Jar Jar Binks. J. Hoberman of the Village Voice called Binks “a rabbit-eared ambulatory lizard whose Pidgin English degenerates from a pseudo-Caribbean patois to Teletubby gurgle.” Tim de Lisle describes Binks as “cloying, shrieky, barely audible, a gangling exhibitionist goat with an attention-deficit disorder.” Carlo Cavagna, after calling Binks an “idiotic swimming donkey,” muses: “…what sidekick ideas did Lucas have to reject in order to reach the point where Jar Jar actually seemed like a winning concept? A tree-dwelling walrus with a Russian accent?” The outrage over Binks was not solely limited to film critics, either:

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8. Ibid.
according to North, fans set up websites where users could graphically abuse and
desecrate Binks’ effigy using mouse clicks or discuss different ways to gruesomely kill
the character.9

What it is about Jar Jar Binks that aroused such hateful and visceral reactions is
strongly debated and not exact, but rather a number of different factors. Authors have
proposed the reasons for his controversial nature as relating to topics as broad as the
racial and ethnic stereotypes he exhibits, the excessively juvenile and slapstick
comedic aspects of his character, the feeling of protection and idealism over a film
franchise that fans may feel, and a general mistrust of him resulting from him being a
digital rather than corporeal character.

A strong consensus of critics writing about Binks and racial stereotyping accuse
Binks of mocking Afro-Caribbean stereotypes. Some have said that Binks’ physical
appearance caricatures Jamaicans.10 Lucas has pushed back on this, asking “How in the
world could you take an orange amphibian and say that he’s a Jamaican?,”11 and some
writers such as Andrew Howe agree with such skepticism.12 Lucas and Howe are
correct as far as physical appearances go: though Binks’ massive hanging ears do

Culture, Identities and Technology in the Star Wars Films: Essays on the Two
Trilogies, ed. Carl Silvio and Tony M. Vinci (Jefferson, NC: McFarland & Company,
2007), 156.

10. Ibid.


12. Andrew Howe, “Star Wars in Black and White: Race and Racism in a
Galaxy Not So Far Away,” in Sex, Politics and Religion in Star Wars: An Anthology,
somewhat resemble dreadlocks, the physical similarities with Binks and a Caribbean caricature really do end there. However, it is not the physical attributes of Binks that so clearly tread in the waters of racial stereotyping, but rather his speech, actions, mannerisms, and the plot role that he and his species takes.

Jar Jar Binks’ speech is heavily accented and his words are a syntactically mangled form of English. According to the book *Star Wars Episode I: The Visual Dictionary*, which was published by Lucas Books and therefore officially licensed by Lucasfilm, Binks “speaks a pidgin Gungan dialect of Galactic Basic. Few Gungans speak the pure Gungan language.”13 This highlights two issues: first, the fact that English is called Galactic Basic in the *Star Wars* universe calls attention to the centralization and normalization of English language and English-speaking culture in the films. Second, it casts serious aspersions on the Gungans as a species, implying that they’re unintelligent enough to be unable to speak their own language that they created,14 and thus must resort to a comical dialect of a human-centric tongue. Put in comparison to the other main characters of the film, such as Liam Neeson’s Qui-Gon Jinn and Ewan McGregor’s Obi-Wan Kenobi, who both exhibit British accents, and the young Queen Amidala and child Anakin Skywalker, Binks speaks less comprehensively than anyone.15 Even the leader of the Gungans, Boss Nass, speaks in such a dialect, and his early stubborn refusal to acknowledge outside threats to his  

15. Ibid.
people and his summary dismissal of the humans of Naboo only serve to further cement the insular and backwards nature of the Gungans in the minds of the viewers.

Jar Jar Binks’ actions as well as the situations he gets into, along with his plot role in general, combine with his aforementioned linguistic characteristics to degrade him as a character even more. He is clumsy and prone to knocking over or ruining anything he touches, such as when he causes a destructive ruckus in Watto’s shop directly after being told not to touch anything, and when he gets his hand stuck in the engine of Anakin’s pod racer. Binks also finds himself as the butt of many crude and juvenile jokes that either have to do with bodily functions or use Binks’ own body as the joke itself. He steps in a pile of dung on Tatooine, gets his frog-like tongue stuck around a cooked animal being sold by a street vendor, uses the word “doo-doo” in conversation, gets flatulated upon by a camel-like animal, and sticks his head in a current of energy, which results in his tongue lolling out of his oversized mouth uncontrollably. Clearly, Binks is someone to be laughed at, and for whom any indignity, no matter how gross or unsanitary, is not too excessive.

All of these characteristics of Jar Jar Binks fit into one older film stereotype of blacks as the comic relief for whites: that of what Donald Bogle defines as “the coon.” Bogle describes the “coon” stereotype as “the Negro as amusement object


17. Ibid.

and black buffoon”\textsuperscript{19} who is “unreliable,” “lazy,” “butcher[s] the English language,” and displays character traits such as cowardice, stupidity, and superstition, all of which while existing opposite a white hero who is rational and displays none of the same negative characteristics.\textsuperscript{20} In \textit{The Phantom Menace}, all of these descriptions are emphatically met: Binks is clearly intended to be an amusement object belonging to the non-white Other, he is clumsy and unreliable, shows instances of laziness by complaining constantly, butchers English in his speech, shows cowardice by surrendering to the Droid Army while acting as a general, displays stupidity by getting into trouble often and needing to be helped out by the white human characters, and subscribes to the superstitious religious beliefs of the Gungans.

Adding to the complications of Jar Jar Binks’ depiction are both the dynamics of his relationships to the white characters of the film as well as how he was acted. Binks was performed by Ahmed Best, a relatively inexperienced African-American actor who wore a Jar Jar Binks costume and provided motion capture for his scenes so the other actors could judge his presence and position even though Binks’ final version would be digitized.\textsuperscript{21} This brings up echoes of issues surrounding James Earl Jones and Darth Vader from the first trilogy: once again, a black actor is giving voice to a character that is not explicitly human. Though \textit{The Phantom Menace} did have a more racially diverse cast than the other \textit{Star Wars} films that came before it, the other characters of color, Jedi Master Mace Windu and Queen Amidala’s guard captain, \\

\textsuperscript{19} Bogle, \textit{An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films}, 7-8.  

\textsuperscript{20} Ibid., 8.  

\textsuperscript{21} Wetmore, \textit{Empire Triumphant}, 143.
Panaka, are relatively minor and their roles do not affect the story much. While with
the characters of Amidala, Qui-Gon Jinn and Obi-Wan Kenobi, Binks has a habit of
expressing his utmost devotion, worship, and servitude towards them. After his initial
encounter with Qui-Gon, Binks declares to him that “Mesa yous humbule servaunt,”22
and when Qui-Gon, as a morally righteous white character, declines Binks’ offer,
Binks is insistent, claiming that such servitude and pledging is demanded by the Gods
as a debt for his life.23 By placing himself in utter, life-binding servitude, and
endorsing it as the God-given way of the world, Binks is essentially becoming what
has been called the “happy slave” archetype: a black character, usually simple minded,
who is perfectly content to do whatever his white master or superior desires and
accepts such a dynamic as part of the natural order.24

Beyond the race and ethnic stereotyping aspects of Jar Jar Binks is the issue of
his state as a CGI (Computer Generated Imagery) character rather than a human actor.
Even the aforementioned Andrew Howe, who defends Lucas as far as accusations of
racism, concedes that Binks failed largely as a CGI character which contributed to
audiences’ dislike of him, writing: “Certainly, some of the overreach with Jar Jar is
attributable to how annoying audiences found the character, perhaps in part a reaction
to the ascendancy of CGI…as well as the perception that Lucas included him in the


23. Ibid.

24. Wetmore, Empire Triumphant, 145.
narrative largely to sell action figures.”\textsuperscript{25} The second contention here is an important one, as it is reminiscent of one of the chief criticisms of \textit{Return of the Jedi}, which was that the teddy bear-like Ewoks were created to drive merchandise sales rather than contribute more effectively to the film.\textsuperscript{26}

However, what is more crucial to look at is the distinction between a failed CGI character like Jar Jar Binks and more successful implementations of the same technology of the time period. In comparing \textit{The Phantom Menace} to contemporary films with major CGI components such as the \textit{Lord of the Rings} trilogy of 2001-03 (with the character of Gollum) or 2003’s \textit{Hulk}, Dan North asserts that a major difference between them is how those CGI characters interface and fit in with their environment, and how the technology enriches the storytelling of the films. Speaking specifically of Hulk, North states:

\begin{quote}
In \textit{Hulk}, Bruce Banner’s exploration of his new body becomes the motivation for the spectacular demonstrations of the power of CGI, bonding the film’s content and form into close co-dependents. Jar Jar Binks is permitted no such self-reflexivity and is required to deliver a fully integrated nuanced performance alongside human actors. His virtuality is not justified by narrative or thematic factors, and such a performance is out of reach of current computer graphics technologies. Accordingly, the results appear more like mistakes than exploratory steps towards imminent success.\textsuperscript{27}
\end{quote}

In essence, Binks simply lacks substantive connection with the plot and with the \textit{Star Wars} universe to justify both his presence and the CGI aspects of his character. Whereas Gollum’s warped pseudo-human form in the \textit{Lord of the Rings}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{25} Howe, “\textit{Star Wars} in Black and White,” 18.
\item \textsuperscript{26} Dana White, \textit{George Lucas} (Minneapolis: Lerner, 1999), 104.
\item \textsuperscript{27} North, “Kill Binks,” 158.
\end{itemize}
trilogy is central to his history and interactions as a character, and Bruce Banner’s changing physical form in Hulk is the impetus for the film’s plot, there is nothing about Binks’ digitized form that critically matters to The Phantom Menace. Unlike the special effects of scenes such as the two destructions of the Death Star or the space combat battles in the first Star Wars trilogy, the elaborate CGI construction of Binks adds nothing to the plot. Given that so much of the film is focused on Binks’ digitized comedic antics, then, along with the fact that his non-human form makes him more difficult to identify with for a human audience, it is no surprise that he has become so harshly scorned and vilified.

Amidala, The Trade Federation, and the Reemergence of Asian Cultural Appropriation and Stereotyping

For as much focus as Jar Jar Binks has received in critical readings of his presence in the Star Wars prequel trilogy, he is far from the only character that contains troubling racial or ethnic stereotypes or portrayals. Many aspects of Queen Amidala’s character as well as the antagonist Trade Federation demonstrate either the cultural appropriation or unflattering portrayal of Asian stereotypes or cultures, and given how heavy of an influence Asian cultures and religions played in the establishment of the Star Wars universe (as discussed in Chapter 3), this shift towards a more blatant cultural caricature represents a step backwards from the conscious steps towards inclusivity that were taken in The Empire Strikes Back and Return of the Jedi.

Queen Amidala is played by Natalie Portman, a white American actress, though her makeup, hair styles and costuming heavily reference archetypes of Asian arts or
According to Trisha Biggar, the costume designer for Episodes I-III, the throne room of Naboo as well as the costumes are intended to invoke a “Chinese Imperial feel.” Amidala’s handmaidens’ body-covering clothing is based on the kimono, and the flowing dresses that Amidala wears herself are rooted in their design by Mongolian and Tibetan dress. Her facial makeup and hair also strongly resemble that of a traditional Japanese kabuki actor or a geisha, as her face is painted white with stylistic red markings on her lips and cheeks, and her black hair is adorned with decorations and arranged in a number of high and sweeping designs and assorted headpieces that accentuate them. The red markings on the white face paint she wears, particularly on her upper lip, denote her as a heroic character in the kumadori style of makeup within traditional Japanese kabuki tradition, and the light red color symbolizes passion and desire, setting Amidala up as the object of both for Anakin in Attack of the Clones and Revenge of the Sith. Given that Anakin is dressed in the same Asian-inspired clothing as the Jedi from the original trilogy, this is once again an instance where white actors in Star Wars are acting out an Asian-inspired narrative, yet


the Westernization of the films at large effectively effaces the appropriation of Asian
culture that is being used to make the *Star Wars* universe exotic to a Western audience.

Asian culture and stereotypes are not only reflected in the architecture and
costuming of actors in Episodes I-III, but also in the villainous Neimoidian aliens of
the Trade Federation, who strongly exhibit criminal and power-hungry characteristics
in the vein of Sax Rohmer’s Fu Manchu, the recurring Asian supervillain of mid-20th
century literature and film that drew considerable protests and accusations of racism
from his portrayal. The Neimoidians speak English (or Galactic Basic, in *Star Wars*
parlance), but do so with a heavily Asian accent and cadence, and their pupil-less eyes
are slanted, bisected by a diagonal black line.33 Like Fu Manchu, they seek absolute
world domination over Naboo, and their particularly predatory form of capitalist
economic aggression resembles a form of Western cinematic paranoia over Asian
business practices common in late-20th Century Western films.34 The descriptions of
Neimoidian society in official printed *Star Wars* publications also nod to stereotypical
Asian qualities, particularly those associated with the Japanese: the Neimoidians are a
“status-driven society” with “exceptional organizing abilities” that “have built the
largest commercial corporation in the galaxy.”35 Moreover, in the tradition of Fu
Manchu as well as in the aforementioned portrayal of threatening Asian business
practices in Western films, the heroes that must foil these villains in *Star Wars* are all
white: Anakin, Qui-Gon Jinn, Obi-Wan Kenobi, and Amidala. This process of


34. Wetmore, *Empire Triumphant*, 158.

building villains with Asian stereotypes and making them aliens, while at the same
time placing white actors in the Asian-inspired depiction of heroes, creates a dangerous
pattern of commentary: it suggests that species, and therefore race, defines the
goodness or evilness of the character, and that the good lies within the Westernized Jedi that we are already predisposed to like because of their familiarity to us.

**Tattooine Revisited: Episodes I-III Doubling Down on the Middle Eastern Stereotyping of Episodes IV-VI**

The centrality of the planet Tatooine to the plot of *Star Wars* and its persistent recurrence throughout the films makes it a strong artifact to examine as far as tracing changes and themes through the series. The trend of unflattering portrayals of Middle Eastern stereotypes on Tatooine that began with the Sand People (now called Tusken Raiders) and the Jawas of *A New Hope* and continued with Jabba the Hutt in *Return of the Jedi* is once again present in Episodes I-III, and in many cases is even more overt and harsh. Watto (the flying alien who owns Anakin as a slave), the Tusken Raiders, Jabba the Hutt (making his prequel appearance), and several other alien species such as the Twi’lek all combine to form an overall negative portrayal of Middle Eastern stereotypes.

Watto, the Toydarian alien that owns Anakin, can fit into several different anti-Semitic archetypes. Readings of Watto as a Jewish caricature are credible given his exaggerated hooked nose, his crooked merchant-like behavior, and his obsession with money – after all, Qui-Gon tries to persuade him to accept off-world currency for a part for his ship, but Watto resists it, and jovially declares that money is the only thing
that is able to persuade him. A case could also be made for Watto being an Arab stereotype, given his accent and protectiveness over his slaves. Allen Woll and Randall Miller argue that “Modern movie Arabs seem[ed] more interested in the Westerner’s money than their women,” and so if we are to compare the decadent harem nature of Jabba’s palace and his lascivious gestures towards Leia with Watto’s obsession with money and property in Episodes I-III, then the depiction of Watto on Tatooine mirrors the typical negative portrayals of Arabs in Western cinema.

However, in their portrayal of characters and species introduced in the original Star Wars trilogy, Episodes I-III do not move completely away from the negative stereotypes that plagued those films, and in several cases embellish the negative portrayals associated with those characters and species. Jabba’s callous brutality, which was on display when he sent his dancer Oola to her death in Return of the Jedi, is back in The Phantom Menace, when he starts the pod race by biting off an animal’s head and spitting it at a gong as well as pushing a helpless creature off of his balcony to fall to its death. The Tusken Raiders, who were last seen attacking Luke in A New Hope, make their return in the prequel trilogy, and their cruelty and aggression are emphasized even more so. In The Phantom Menace, they amuse themselves by shooting the defenseless pod pilots racing through the canyons, and in Attack of the

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38. Ibid.
Clones, they kidnap Anakin’s mother, Shmi.39 When Anakin finds her, he sees that they have Shmi tied up to a wooden rack in one of their desert tents, which strongly represents a stereotypical desert nomad camp, and that she has been the victim of vicious physical abuse and is on the verge of death. Though it is not explicitly said that she has been the victim of sexual abuse as well, her prone position and the cloth bindings that have been used to secure her wrists invite suspicion and sympathy from the audience, especially since her role as a mother has been emphasized.

Though the cruelty of the Tusken Raiders is noteworthy, the scene as a whole as well as what happens afterwards is just as important in revealing the messages of the film. Although Shmi has more plot importance as Anakin’s mother, she is still a slave, yet in comparison to the other scenes of the deaths of slaves and servants in the Star Wars films (such as the aforementioned Oola as well as those who get eaten by the sarlacc and those who die aboard Jabba’s barge in Return of the Jedi), her death scene is poignant and long. She also is the only slave character that the viewers get the chance to be familiar with that is an adult human, and a white female at that, and so the same anxieties that are played upon when Leia is put in danger in Episodes IV-VI arise once again. Unlike Leia who only briefly spends time in Jabba’s control, Shmi is a slave from the moment we are introduced to her, yet because she is explicitly human and easier to identify with in addition to being Anakin’s mother, her death gets its due acknowledgment.

The scene that occurs directly after Shmi’s death is also noteworthy for analysis, as it exemplifies the difference between how the deaths of aliens and the racial Other are often portrayed in contrast to those of human characters. Though Shmi’s death is certainly tragic and unwarranted, so is Anakin’s subsequent slaughter of the entirety of the Tusken Raider village, women and young children included. Although Anakin’s act is despicable and the cruelty of his choice would serve as a powerful image of his pending turn to the Dark Side of the Force, the directors choose not to show it. Perhaps such a choice could be made to spare the viewers such agony, but even so, it has the effect of once again sanitizing and hiding the mass killing of the racial Other done by a white hero. As viewers, we may be horrified by his choice, but we don’t have to live with the image of Anakin committing mass murder and we don’t have to see the same human emotions of terror and pain that any of the Tusken Raiders might feel from seeing their families die before their eyes. Because they are the clear Other, the tragedy of their deaths is minimized, and even appropriated: Anakin’s anguish and guilt over what he has done gets far more attention and screen time than those that truly suffered from his deeds.

The Twi’lek are another species that is first introduced in Episodes IV-VI and appears again in Episodes I-III, and just like Jabba and the Tusken Raiders, their depiction contains a troubling set of stereotypes. The most prevalent one, and the most important when it comes to analyzing them as a species for racial commentary, is that female Twi’leks are heavily sexualized throughout all of the films. Oola, Jabba’s slave
dancer from *Return of the Jedi*, is dressed only in sheer netting,\(^{40}\) and is forced to perform routines for him until he sends her to her death for resisting his advances. In *The Phantom Menace*, female Twi’leks appear again as part of Sebulba’s (Anakin’s pod racing rival) harem, fawning over him prior to the race.\(^{41}\) Even the one female Twi’lek Jedi Master, Aayla Secura, wears a top that bares her cleavage and midriff instead of the conservative clothing typical of Jedi, who are required to remain celibate. The official *Star Wars* website used to describe the sensual nature of female Twi’leks as follows: “Few things are as graceful as a female Twi’lek in motion. This beautiful image has forever doomed generations of young Twi’leks into servitude, as the wealthy and corrupt have taken to brandishing Twi’leks as badges of prestige.”\(^{42}\) This description is noteworthy not only because it acknowledges such aspects of female Twi’leks, but also because it partially blames them for their enslavement: it is their image that is said to doom them into slavery, not those who would greedily claim them for their own. This focus on the sexuality and ownership of female Twi’leks is reflected in many of the licensed *Star Wars* media artifacts as well: for example, the MMORPG (Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game) *Star Wars: The Old Republic* describes Twi’leks in the game’s informational codex as “often taken as

\(^{40}\) Marquand, *Return of the Jedi*.

\(^{41}\) Lucas, *The Phantom Menace*.

slaves, [and] exported to markets throughout the Outer Rim,"43 allows players to roleplay numerous sexual encounters with Twi’lek NPCs (Non-Playable Characters), and even allows players to play a character that gets their own female Twi’lek slave.44 The animated TV series Star Wars: The Clone Wars even has an episode where a human male and Twi’lek female have married and had a child together.45 The Twi’lek men, on the other hand, are portrayed as rather undesirable. Bib Fortuna, the Twi’lek advisor to Jabba in Return of the Jedi, is a simpleton and sycophant who falls for Luke Skywalker’s mind tricks, while Orn Free Taa, the Twi’lek senator who appears in Episodes I-III, is obese and ugly.

All of these examples call attention to a sensitive yet important topic: the racial Other as the object for sexual exhibition and conquest by men not of their own race, and such a sexual conquest being treated as a status symbol. The Twi’leks are so close to humans that they are able to reproduce with them, yet their marking as the Other makes their enslavement and overt bodily exploitation easier to accept. Just as Oola would likely provoke strong criticism if she were portrayed as a human in her role in Return of the Jedi, so too would the various appearances of Twi’leks in sexual and slavery-related scenes in Episodes I-III. In this way, Episodes I-III exacerbate some of the troubling issues of race and species portrayal of Episodes IV-VI rather than


44. Ibid.

representing any sort of progressivity on the topic. Old stereotypes of race are reinforced instead of challenged, giving credence to arguments that the Star Wars prequel is socially regressive instead of progressive as a body of work.
CHAPTER 5

EPISODE VII: A MODERN EVOLUTION OF RACE AND “OTHERNESS” IN THE NOSTALGIA OF THE FORCE AWAKENS

A New Studio Takes On Old Issues: Comparing John Boyega’s Finn to Billy Dee Williams’ Lando Calrissian

As noted in the Introduction, the release of Star Wars Episode VII: The Force Awakens was widely anticipated. Though the ten year gap between the release of Revenge of the Sith in 2005 and The Force Awakens in 2015 would certainly contribute to the excitement, there is another very important factor to consider: instead of being both written and directed by George Lucas, as each of Episodes I-III were, The Force Awakens was made with very limited input from Lucas. He served as a creative consultant for parts of early production stages, but the story and creative influence behind the films was largely in the hands of J.J. Abrams, who both directed the film and co-wrote the screenplay. This was possible because Walt Disney Co. had bought LucasFilm several years prior (and with it the rights to Star Wars), and perhaps noticing the harsh criticisms of Episodes I-III and heavy fan criticisms of those films, Disney decided not to let Lucas be the driving force behind the series any longer. Lucas was not happy about this: in an interview with The Hollywood Reporter, he likened his loss of control over Star Wars to having sold his children to “white slavers.”¹ Nevertheless, Abrams was in charge, and one of the casting decisions he

made generated instant interest: the selection of little-known Nigerian-British actor
John Boyega to play the Storm Trooper-turned-defector Finn, one of the lead roles of
the film.

John Boyega’s casting was very significant given the primacy of white heroes
in Episodes I-III and the lack of a human character of color in a leading role since Billy
Dee Williams’ Lando Calrissian in Episodes V-VI. The cast overall was much more
diverse in its human characters than many of the previous films, and this was a
conscious choice by director J.J. Abrams, who said: “We wanted the movie to look the
way the world looks, and I think it is important that people see themselves
represented in film.”² The choice to cast a black male actor and white female actor as
the two main heroes, then, pushed the modernized Star Wars universe beyond its
historic white male centricity and have the film reflect modern progressive values of
racial and gender inclusivity.

Many aspects of Boyega’s character are positive and reflect some of the same
heroic and noteworthy characteristics that came to define Lando Calrissian later on in
The Empire Strikes Back and Return of the Jedi. Our very first exposure to Finn,
though he has not yet had his face revealed from behind his Storm Trooper mask, is to
watch him disobey orders from Kylo Ren to join in the killing of innocent villagers on
the planet Jakku. He gives comfort to a fellow trooper who is fatally wounded, and he

². Michael Nguyen, “‘Go Asians!’: J.J. Abrams Talks Diversity in ‘Star Wars’
Casting,” NBC News, July 14, 2015, accessed March 16, 2016,
star-wars-casting-n392081.
is visibly shaken by the experience. Very clearly, and immediately, we know that this is a person with morals and courage: Finn recognizes the immorality of his orders, and he is willing to take the risk of disobeying them knowing full well that his superiors would have few qualms about punishing him severely, if not lethally, for it. This is very much unlike the audience’s first introduction to Lando, where Han Solo has already said that Lando may not be trustworthy and we see him make uncomfortable advances towards Leia. Adding to this, the scene shortly after where Finn removes his helmet (which we soon find out is against protocol as well) gives him a sense of vulnerability by letting the audience know that, while they all wear the same uniform that covers the entire body, the Storm Troopers are people as well.

Finn also demonstrates heroism in battle, and comparing some of his feats to those of Lando as well as those of the white heroes in the previous Star Wars films also demonstrates the progressive nature of The Force Awakens. Just as Lando puts himself in danger to help Leia escape Cloud City, Finn puts himself in danger to come to the aid of Rey multiple times, such as when he joins in the battle against the invading Storm Troopers near Maz Kanata’s cantina, accompanies Han Solo and Chewbacca on their covert mission to sabotage the laser superweapon on Starkiller Base, and when he takes on Kylo Ren in a lightsaber duel in the forest shortly after. Selflessness is a major part of Finn, and the fact that this both adds to his heroism as well as gets him


into trouble at times (such as when Han Solo and Rey both find out about his dishonesty about being a part of The Resistance) enriches him as a character.

Nevertheless, there are some scenes in which either Finn’s actions or his development as a character are not as progressive. When Finn helps break Poe Dameron out of his captivity early in the film, he babbles nervously to himself to stay calm, and the contrast between him and the calm and self-assured Poe is striking. When Poe and Finn are flying away from a First Order Star Destroyer in their stolen TIE Fighter, Poe asks Finn his name, to which he replies with his given serial number, FN-2187, saying “that’s the only name they ever gave me.”6 Immediately, Poe declares “I’m not using it” and “I’m calling you Finn.”7 This scene does several things: first, it calls attention to the barbarous nature of the First Order in that they would give one of their soldiers a serial number instead of a name, robbing them of their humanity and essentially designating them as slave-like property. We also know that this is the only life Finn has ever known: as Phasma and Hux are discussing him after his defection, the monitor they are standing by shows a picture of a small black child, implying that he was raised to be a Storm Trooper, no more.8

However, while this scene justifiably places negative attention on the First Order, the fact that Poe gives Finn his new name instead of encouraging him to come up with one on his own, and that Finn so easily and joyfully accepts it, seems to rob Finn of an important part of his self-determination. Though Poe also represents


7. Ibid.

8. Ibid.
diversity among the casting of characters, as he is played by the Guatemalan-Cuban Oscar Isaac, his character itself falls back on many of the American cowboy stereotypes that are associated with Han Solo: like Han, Poe is a cunning pilot, is brave in the face of pain, is insolent towards his captors, wears a leather jacket, is good with weaponry and a savvy fighter, and is strikingly handsome.

Also worth noting is the way that *The Force Awakens* portrays the relationship between Finn and Rey and some of the questionable decisions that Finn makes in order to try and impress her. When they first meet on Jakku and are pursued by First Order forces, Rey repeatedly asks him to quit holding her hand; after all, she had already demonstrated her toughness by chasing him and knocking him down when she initially thought he was a thief. Writer Kate Bennion of The Mary Sue minimizes this behavior of Finn’s in evaluating him as a character, saying “Is Finn being possessive? Patronizing? Overly forward? Doubtful. The way I see it, he just lost his (Stormtrooper) comrade and his new friend Poe in rapid succession, and he is determined not to lose anyone else—to the point of physically holding onto them.”

Yet, immediately after their escape aboard the Millennium Falcon, after Rey says that they need to go back to Jakku, Finn asks why and if it’s because she has “a cute boyfriend.” This inquiry of Finn’s is not necessary at all to the plot nor to any


potential organic development of romance between them, yet his ill-timed and ill-
received inquisition recalls the instances of and associated tropes involved in Lando’s
unwelcome and ill-timed romantic advances towards Leia. Instead of allowing Rey to
fully concentrate on their escape and then on saving their lives by repairing the
damaged Millennium Falcon, by holding her hand and then later asking about her
personal life, Finn makes Rey defend her own physical space and emotional
boundaries in addition to fixing the ship and piloting it (and him) away from danger.

Similarly, Finn has a propensity for lying, especially when it comes to serving
Rey’s interests or proving his worth to her. Upon being asked by Rey if he is a
member of the Resistance, he declares that he is, even though the audience knows he is
not, and his repeated assertions to the contrary are painfully transparent. Finn ends up
having to convince the droid BB-8 to reveal the location of the Resistance’s
headquarters to Rey while pretending to know it himself, and once BB-8 does, he
flashes the droid a thumbs-up when Rey looks back down at her repair work. BB-8
uses a lighter tool to return a similar gesture, and though the scene hits an effective
comic note, it does seem like both are celebrating their pulling a successful fib over an
innocent and well-meaning girl who is busy saving both of their lives. Finn lies even
when it could potentially put Rey and the entire Resistance in danger, as Han Solo
rightfully points out when they land on Starkiller Base and Finn reveals that he actually
does not know how to disable the superweapon as he claimed in an earlier resistance
meeting, and instead only went for the purpose of saving Rey. The lack of assuredness
that Finn displays in other aspects of his character is reflected in his reliance on
dishonesty to keep his pursuits alive, and is one of the few negative aspects of his character overall.

The climactic moment of *The Force Awakens* also shows a major difference between Finn and Lando Calrissian: their level of participation in the film’s ultimate heroic act. In *Return of the Jedi*, while Luke, Han Solo and Leia all have their moments of heroism in their respective roles, Lando’s is arguably the greatest of them all, as he is the one that lands the fatal shot on the Death Star.\(^{12}\) Heroism in that instance is shared equally by all heroes of different races, as each have fulfilled their role and are present to celebrate the big moment. However, in *The Force Awakens*, Finn does not get the opportunity to participate in the glory of victory. Upon losing his lightsaber duel with Kylo Ren, he is wounded badly, falls unconscious, and does not wake up for the remainder of the film. Meanwhile, Poe Dameron (who has comparably little screen time compared to Finn) flies in and lands the shot that ends up destroying Starkiller Base, and Rey picks up the lightsaber and, though she is not a trained soldier like Finn, manages to best Kylo Ren in their fight.\(^{13}\) Despite all of the risks and bravery Finn has displayed throughout the film, he gets pushed to the side in the film’s climactic scenes while the white heroes get to celebrate victory and mourn Han Solo’s death. Finn has no agency to impact the film’s final moments, and the last image the audience is left with is Rey holding her lightsaber out to Luke Skywalker in the only sighting of him in the entire movie. It implies that Rey’s quest for Luke Skywalker’s knowledge is the primary driving narrative in the end rather than Finn’s

\(^{12}\) Marquand, *Return of the Jedi*.

\(^{13}\) Abrams, *The Force Awakens*. 

83
story, even though he nearly gave his life and their stories had been intertwined for nearly the entire film.

Rey, Amidala and Leia: The Evolution of Heroism, Sexuality, and Agency in the White Female Leads of Star Wars

Following in the footsteps of both the original and prequel trilogies, The Force Awakens introduced a new female lead character in Rey. However, unlike Leia from Episodes IV-VI and Amidala from Episodes I-III, Rey’s narrative is focused much more on her heroism rather than her romantic relationships or her need to be rescued by the male heroes of the film.

When the audience is first introduced to Rey, she is seen scavenging for ship parts in the desert wastelands of Jakku. Though it is by no means a glorious life, one thing is certain from the first moment we see her: she is tough and has no problems being self-sufficient, and is capable of surviving in a land populated by dangerous creatures and sleazy male characters such as the alien she sells spare parts to. This is much different than our introductions to Leia and Amidala, where they are introduced with emphasis on either their vulnerability or their looks. Rey is not wearing a dress, or a bikini, or makeup, or anything resembling the iconic outfits of Leia or Amidala: her clothing is all-covering and fully functional, serving her existence as a scavenger rather than the eyes of anyone else.

Rey is also different in that she often ends up being the rescuer or the survivor instead of someone in need of help. In A New Hope, Leia is immediately captured by

Darth Vader, and much of the film’s plot involves the rescue process of her by Luke, Han Solo, and the others. Similarly, in Return of the Jedi, she must be rescued by Luke once more, and in both films her physical space is shown to be either violated or in danger of it, by either the interrogation droid or by Jabba the Hutt’s dressing of her in a bikini and his licentious advances towards her. In contrast, Rey is easily able to defend herself from potential attackers, even driving away an armed slaver who wished to capture BB-8. From the beginning, it is made clear that Rey will not be filling the role of the sexualized white female under constant duress. Though she does get captured by Kylo Ren and carried off like property,\(^\text{15}\) and his own interrogations of her have a dimension of sexual tension to them (which will be explored in the next section), the critical difference between Rey and Leia is that Rey breaks free on her own. Finn, Han Solo and Chewbacca come to Starkiller Base with the possibility of rescuing her, but by the time they find her, she has already freed herself.

Rey is much stronger of an individual and less sexually objectified in comparison to Amidala as well. When Amidala is first introduced, she is surrounded by throngs of brightly dressed handmaidens, wears elaborate clothing, and wears heavy makeup.\(^\text{16}\) Much of her personal narrative throughout Episodes I-III is focused on her relationship with Anakin as well: he is constantly protecting her, helping her with her own objectives, and his courting of her takes up considerable screen time. Though she sometimes participates in action scenes, more of her story focuses around their romance, and her presence in Revenge of the Sith is centered heavily around her

\(^{15}\) Abrams, The Force Awakens.

\(^{16}\) Lucas, The Phantom Menace.
pregnancy with Anakin’s children. In contrast, Rey’s clothing is completely
nondescript. She wears no uniform and needs no attendants to go about her daily
duties. Though there is still the potential for a romantic relationship between her and
Finn, it does not totally dominate her purpose as a character, and nor do any
expressions of affection between the two go into explicitly romantic territory, unlike
the numerous scenes of Anakin and Amidala rolling around in grass together or kissing
in private. Rey’s knowledge of machinery and prowess as a fighter and pilot are more
in line with the skills of those characters that have been traditionally males in the
previous Star Wars films as well.

Perhaps the most significant aspect that moves Rey away from the vulnerable
white female motif, however, is her command of the Force. Rey is not the first female
Force-sensitive character of significance (Leia, as Luke’s brother, holds that
distinction, and several bit characters of Episodes I-III were female Jedi, but none held
a significant role). However, she is the first female character to be in a lead role and
perform many of the Jedi abilities that have traditionally been performed by male
characters. She uses the so-called “Jedi Mind Trick” of persuasion on a guard to aid in
her escape,17 which was done first by Obi-Wan Kenobi, Luke, and other male Jedi, and
when she uses the Force to pull the lightsaber from the snow to her hand in her duel
with Kylo Ren, it is directly reminiscent of Luke doing the same thing to free himself
from the Wampa cave in The Empire Strikes Back. Even though Leia holds a position
of command as General and founder of The Resistance, Rey’s abilities both in combat

and in the Force set her apart as just as formidable and strong as any character, male or female, in the *Star Wars* series.

**Intergalactic Affluenza: The Evolution of the Toxic White Male in Star Wars from Anakin Skywalker to Kylo Ren**

*The Force Awakens* is deliberately similar to Episodes IV-VI in many ways,\(^{18}\) and its main villain Kylo Ren is no exception. Like Darth Vader of the original trilogy, Kylo Ren wears full black clothing, a black cape, uses a red light saber, and wears a samurai-like helmet that covers his full head. He is cruel and vindictive, and is capable of manipulating the force in lethal ways. However, there is one major difference between the two that points towards an evolution of villainous characters from previous *Star Wars* films to *The Force Awakens*: we see Kylo Ren without his helmet early and often. This allows us to view him as a person, and, as a young white male, he is explicitly a member of the racial and gender groups that have been historically cast as the norm by those in power in in Western society, instead of being some mysterious alien, racial or robot other. Thus, many of his villainous acts and undesirable traits are put in the context of problematic things done by the explicitly non-other, not things easily dismissed as nefarious deeds endemic of the character of some non-human or otherized being.

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In particular, the construction of Kylo Ren as a spoiled, temperamental, entitled, arrogant, and power hungry white male marks a major leap from the villains of *Star Wars* films past who played upon either racial or ethnic stereotypes to create fear and uneasiness in the audience. The danger of his unchecked power and privilege is on full display, as he throws multiple tantrums when things don’t go his way, once thrashing a computer terminal with his light saber upon learning of his crew’s failure to capture BB-8 on Jakku and again hacking Rey’s interrogation chair apart after she escapes from it.19 These incidents portray Kylo Ren as a petulant teenager who is hopelessly spoiled and doesn’t deserve the influence and power he has, and the fact that he does not get punished for his outbursts nor does anyone dare to check his behavior emphasizes this comparison even further. This lashing out at inanimate objects is also part of a pattern of cowardice with Kylo Ren: he has no problem executing defenseless innocents, or torturing prisoners, yet he always seems to show up after the more difficult fighting is finished in the more significant battles. On Jakku, he only comes out after the fight has been won, and on Takodana and Starkiller Base, he is preoccupied with his own tasks instead of ever actually leading any troops in battle.

Though Kylo Ren idolizes Darth Vader, and explicitly tries to commune with his spirit over the remains of Vader’s burnt and destroyed helmet, his juvenile fits are very unlike the way Darth Vader behaves when things don’t go his way. While Vader does have a habit of killing his subordinates who fail him, he never loses his composure and never throws emotional fits. This is yet another dimension of Kylo


88
Ren’s character that makes him easy to despise: we know he has loving parents in Han Solo and Leia that openly speak of how much they care about him, and they wanted him to learn from the best Jedi teacher in Luke Skywalker, yet he pushes aside this love and opportunity to try and pretend to be someone that he utterly fails at being. In the very first scene, when speaking to Lor San Tekka, the village elder, Kylo Ren ignores Tekka’s comments that note the artificiality of his persona, as Tekka tells him “You cannot deny the truth that is your family”\(^{20}\) and “The First Order rose from the Dark Side, you did not.”\(^ {21}\) Unlike Darth Vader’s mask which is necessary for his survival, Kylo Ren’s mask is purely for show, as if he needs it to convince himself that he deserves to have the same reputation Darth Vader did.

These emotional fits by Kylo Ren are also strongly reminiscent of those by Anakin Skywalker in Episodes I-III. Both are selfish in their nature: Kylo Ren’s tantrums are born from his frustration with his own shortcomings in carrying out his mission to find Luke Skywalker, and his projections of that failure onto other people or inanimate objects speak to an arrogance, self-centeredness and insecurity that is easy for the audience to recognize. Kylo Ren is unwilling to admit that he is not in total control and power over the situations he is interested in, and often results to insulting others in situations that he’s failed to achieve his objective. One such time is when he tells Lor San Tekka “Look how old you’ve become,”\(^ {22}\) an insult that points notably


\(^ {21}\) Ibid.

\(^ {22}\) Ibid.
towards Tekka’s virility, as if needing to put others down to prove his own manliness. Anakin Skywalker’s acts of rage are also born from emotions arising from insecurity and arrogance: his slaughter of the Tusken Raider villagers is a projection of his own failure to protect his mother, and his increasingly possessive attitude towards Amidala as Episodes I-III progress shows a similar selfishness. When Kylo Ren, in the very beginning of *The Force Awakens*, reenacts one of Anakin’s most notable scenes of wanton cruelty in the slaughter of innocent villagers, the similarity between the two becomes even more apparent. By the end of *Revenge of the Sith*, Anakin is so consumed by his emotional turmoil that he fails to save Amidala and also gets defeated in his fight with Obi-Wan Kenobi. Similarly, Kylo Ren is so unstable that he fails to capture Rey or protect Starkiller Base from destruction.

In addition to the frequent emotional outbursts, Kylo Ren’s insecurity and arrogance comes out in the manner in which he captures and questions Rey. When he captures her, he does so in a way that is extremely objectifying: using the Force, he immobilizes her, knocks her unconscious, and carries her away. Afterwards, when she resists his questioning, he declares rather creepily “I can take what I want,”23 and his words and body posture in relation to Rey while she is held in a restrained and vulnerable position have an elemental of sexual predation to them. Kylo Ren’s goal, as we learn by the end of the film, is to become Rey’s teacher in the ways of the Force and to turn her to the Dark Side, but his hyper-masculine approach to this goal is part of what makes him so abhorrent. He believes that flexing his own strength and power

by forcefully controlling her body and mind will impress her, which is detestable enough in itself, but it is also another sign of his arrogance, as he keeps this belief of superiority up even after being bested by her multiple times. Rey resists Kylo Ren’s probing of her mind for the information he wants and reads his mind instead, yet even after all of that, he shouts to her “You need a teacher!,”24 with the implication that he is qualified to pass judgement on her abilities even if she has demonstrated the ability to best him.

While it is not explicitly clear where Kylo Ren gets his arrogance and sense of privilege from, it is worth noting that his behavior and how they affect others are very closely aligned with the effects of white privilege. Peggy McIntosh, a noted scholar on white privilege, makes an important distinction between strength and power that is important when analyzing the characters of The Force Awakens. McIntosh states: “Power from unearned privilege can look like strength when it is in fact permission to escape or to dominate.”25 Applied to Kylo Ren, this makes perfect sense in the context of his choices and actions. As a descendant of Anakin Skywalker, and thus inheriting the genetic markers of force sensitivity, he has power that he did nothing personally to earn. Yet, he tries to project that unearned power as strength through consciously escaping his previous life of Jedi training, and through the ruthless domination of his


subordinates. This idea of how the dynamic of privilege affects more than just Kylo Ren can be further explained by McIntosh’s writings. Regarding privilege and domination, McIntosh writes:

In some groups, those dominated have actually become strong through not having all of these unearned advantages, and this gives them a great deal to teach the others. Members of so-called privileged groups can seem foolish, ridiculous, infantile, or dangerous by contrast.  

Those dominated in this context would clearly be Finn and Rey: Finn from his previous life as a Storm Trooper, and Rey from being subject to her harsh existence under Unkar Plutt on Jakku. Both Finn and Rey demonstrate strength in many of their endeavors, and those displays of strength do have an impact on others. Kylo Ren, on the other hand, as a member of a privileged group, certainly seems foolish, ridiculous, infantile, and dangerous from his immature outbursts and childish behavior, especially in comparison to the brave Finn and unflappable Rey.

The fact that all of these negative traits are contained within a white male character is very significant. In the context of public conversations on issues of racism and racial injustice that have gained significant prominence around the time of the release of *The Force Awakens*, the acknowledgement of white privilege and ignorance as a destructive force is an important and very progressive statement for a film of such a popular franchise to make, especially given its own controversial history. The choice to locate the enemy in the racial space of what has traditionally been the central norm of whiteness and in the gendered norm of hyper-performative maleness rather than in the space of non-white or non-human otherness is one that carries a powerful message.

in it: we must look at ourselves to see injustice and wrong instead of continually looking for outer forces to blame.

**Maz Kanata, BB-8, and the Kanjiklub: The Other in Supporting Roles of The Force Awakens**

While the new main characters of Finn, Rey and Kylo Ren contain strong statements on race and otherness, there are many other roles in The Force Awakens worth analyzing for how they use race in their construction. The new droid, BB-8, warrants comparisons to the roles of C-3PO and R2-D2 of previous films, as does Maz Kanata, who is significant as one of the few new characters who is not explicitly human. Characters of color also pop up in some of the smaller bit parts of the film, including the brief appearance of the Kanjiklub gang and in the battles of Takodana and Starkiller base, and those parts are worth noting as well.

Though not a major presence in the film by any means, the Kanjiklub gang is worth looking at simply because it is defined so clearly by race in a film which celebrates diversity in so many other ways. *Kanji* is the term for the adopted Chinese characters used in Japanese writing, and the addition of “klub” to this explicitly marks the gang as exclusively Asian. The actors who play the Kanjiklub members are all Asian, and in their scene with Han Solo and Chewbacca, they distinguish themselves by being the only human characters who do not speak English, instead

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speaking in another language and getting subtitles for their speech.\textsuperscript{28} This stands out in comparison to the Resistance, which is shown with a diversity of pilots who are female, Asian, black, white, human, and alien, and who all speak the same language to one another.

BB-8 is another character that bears examination, especially because of the significant differences between him\textsuperscript{29} and C-3PO and R2-D2 of Episodes I-VI. Though not a trait of BB-8 himself, one large difference between BB-8 and the older droids is in how the other characters treat him. Though he starts the film as Poe Dameron’s droid, BB-8 comes under the steward of Rey, Finn, Han Solo and Chewbacca over the course of the film. While in Episodes IV-VI, Han Solo would very often lose his patience with C-3PO and either insult or mistreat him multiple times, only one such instance occurs in \textit{The Force Awakens}, when Han gruffly barks “Move, ball!” as he is walking through the recently-recovered Millennium Falcon.\textsuperscript{30} BB-8 is not continuously belittled or disrespected, and though he is not able to speak English in the way that C-3PO can and his overall persona and smaller stature casts him as more of a pet character than on the same social level as a person, he can still communicate with several characters. Another difference is that unlike C-3PO and R2-D2, who are bought by Owen in \textit{A New Hope} from Jawa traders, BB-8 is never

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\begin{itemize}
  \item 28. Abrams, \textit{The Force Awakens}.
  \item 30. Abrams, \textit{The Force Awakens}.
\end{itemize}

94
bartered off or sold as property. After Rey rescues him from a wandering scavenger, she refuses to sell him to the salvage buyer Unkar Plutt, even as he offers an exorbitant sum. Last, when it comes to comic moments involving BB-8, rarely is it done at his expense. Though one scene has BB-8 bouncing around the Millennium Falcon uncontrollably, he manages to right himself, and when he flashes a thumbs-up sign to Finn using the small welding torch tool embedded inside him, it shows that he participates equally with human characters in comedy and fun, not beneath them or at personal expense as C-3PO often is forced to.

Unlike Episodes VI where Jabba the Hutt and his alien retinue were a prominent part of the film, and Episodes I-III where animated aliens featured heavily in each of the films, The Force Awakens had few alien characters of significance. Other than the returning Chewbacca, the small Maz Kanata is the only new character that largely impacts the plot and is not overtly human. Maz’s species is not actually ever explicitly said, and when asked, J.J. Abrams was non-committal about it, saying: “All that backstory will be forthcoming…In the movie, you don’t learn these things, but I know that these are things that are coming out in other venues.” 31 All we know is that she is at least a thousand years old, and though her body is human-like, her hands have four fingers instead of five. 32 In any case, Maz’s screen portrayal was done using


motion capture technology, and her part was played by the Mexican-Kenyan actress Lupita Nyong’o.

The choice for Maz Kanata to be digitally portrayed is a significant one, then, as just like in the case of Jar-Jar Binks, a black actor or actress is giving a character motion and voice without having their actual physical self shown on screen. Maz does not have anywhere close to the amount of problematic characteristics that Jar-Jar Binks had, which is good, but it should be noted that her digitization means that The Force Awakens, like each of the previous films, missed out on the chance to have a female human of color in a prominent role. Another complicating factor in analyzing Maz Kanata as a character is that her plot role is a modern evolution of a stereotype common to American cinema: that of the “magical negro.” Matthew Hughey describes the “magical negro” archetype as follows:

The MN [magical negro] has become a stock character that often appears as a lower class, uneducated black person who possesses supernatural or magical powers. These powers are used to save and transform disheveled, uncultured, lost, or broken whites (almost exclusively white men) into competent, successful, and content people within the context of the American myth of redemption and salvation.33

While not meeting all of these criteria, arguments can be made for enough of them that Maz Kanata does indeed represent a play on this recurring stereotype. She does not appear uneducated at all, but she does run a bar populated by seedy lower class-appearing characters, and she used to be a smuggler herself. She also definitely possesses magical powers, as she is Force-sensitive and also claims to be able to read

people’s souls by looking into their eyes, saying to Finn “I have lived long enough to see the same eyes in different people. I see your eyes. I know your eyes!”

Yet, though she does function as a guide to the would-be heroes of the film, it is not just white men that she helps. In addition to aiding Han Solo, she helps Rey, a white female, and Finn, a black male. In that regard, Maz Kanata separates herself from comparisons to cinematic “magical negroes” of other contemporary films, such as The Oracle from the *Matrix* film series or John Coffey from *The Green Mile* who enable Christ-like white male saviors in their respective films. Ultimately, though, Maz does end up directly involved in the later heroism of the white Rey: she is the first one to give Rey advice on dealing with the Force, telling her to close her eyes and “feel the Force” much in the same way Yoda and Obi-Wan Kenobi counsels Luke Skywalker. Like Kenobi again, Maz bestows Luke’s lightsaber upon our heroes: she gives Finn Luke Skywalker’s lightsaber that ultimately comes into Rey’s hands, which she uses to defeat Kylo Ren and then, to bring it full circle, present to Luke Skywalker in the closing scene as the impetus for the next film’s narrative.


97
CONCLUSION

Over the course of the seven Star Wars films, there is a definite evolution in the way that race, species, and the concept of the Other is portrayed. That evolution closely mirrors social events or movements at the time of each film’s release, and the acclaim or disdain each individual film earned from notable critics matched how well or poorly each film was sensitive to issues of public concern or social justice.

In Episodes IV-VI, traditional pro-American or pro-Western narratives were dominant. The heroes of A New Hope were idealized white characters who fit into traditional archetypes of the cowboy, David against Goliath, and the sexualized white damsel in distress, and while Lando Calrissian of The Empire Strikes Back and Return of the Jedi made the Rebellion multiracial, it was still very much American. At the same time, Episodes IV-VI mirrored American experimentation with traditionally Asian religions and cultural practices that gained prominence in the 1970s. In particular, the influence of Taoism on the physics of the Force and many individual characters as well as the reflection of iconic Japanese cinematic moments in A New Hope cast the foundation for the Star Wars universe as one that appropriated non-American cultures to manufacture an “exotic” universe.

While the heroes of Episodes IV-VI are idealized for the benefit of a Western audience, the adversarial other in those films was coded into adversaries of America contemporary to the time of each film’s production. Anti-Soviet Cold War narratives were prevalent, as the Empire resembled cinematic stereotypes of Russian representation in multiple arenas.
Although *The Empire Strikes Back* and *Return of the Jedi* were more progressive in that the Rebellion became multiracial, the coding of foreign stereotypes into alien characters was highly problematic. Yoda’s character was saddled with Asian stereotypes borne of a Western romanticization of Asian religions, and Jabba the Hutt’s character was loaded with negative cinematic stereotypes of evil Arab figures. Jabba’s harem of alien slave dancers was particularly troubling in its exoticization of women of the racial other, and the rampant death in the heroes’ escape from Jabba showed insensitivity to the deaths of those the audience might not explicitly identify with.

Instead of building upon the positives of Lando Calrissian’s addition to the Rebellion, Episodes I-III instead suffered greatly from the misuse of CGI and overly caricatured alien figures. Jar-Jar Binks, Watto, and many other aliens of those three films contained a great number of racist attributes and stereotypes. Binks had troubling references to Caribbean culture, linguistics, and the history of slavery, and Watto embodied anti-Semitic stereotypes. The characters of Amidala as well as female aliens such as the Twi’leks also focused heavily on the sexual aspects and stereotypical desirability of women among different races, with Amidala representing yet another white actor dressing in Asian costume and the Twi’leks representing sexual conquest of different races as status symbols.

*The Force Awakens* marked a major shift in the direction of the *Star Wars* franchise, as while it was very similar plot-wise to *A New Hope*, its cast was much more diverse and the actions the characters took bucked many traditional stereotypes that had plagued past films. At the same time, other characters and instances in the
plot stuck with older, problematic stereotypes, such as Maz Kanata playing the magical racial other that aids the white hero.

Finn in particular was significant as a black male lead who was moral and courageous instead of initially untrustworthy and deceitful as Lando Calrissian was, ever if he was flawed with his propensity for dishonesty. Finn is definitely one of the strongest heroic characters of the franchise thus far, though his absence from the end of the film disrupts him from being properly credited for it.

Rey is also a significant and positive evolution of the female heroes of Star Wars, as instead of being trapped in the sexualized or vulnerable white female stereotype, she is self-sufficient, brave, skilled, and strong. The fact that she has such agency to impact the outcome of situations in the film and performs feats traditionally associated with male characters means that she is more than simply a love interest of a male hero, and the expressions of affection between her and Finn are mutually appropriate and respectful rather than uncouth.

The decision to make the primary evil character, Kylo Ren, a young white male character was a major event in the Star Wars series as it located the enemy in a racial and gender identity that was very explicitly not the other. His unstable temper, arrogance, entitlement, and dishonesty call attention to the danger of those attributes when they exist in the leaders of society, which make him a much more important enemy to think about, and one that is more complex than just another nefarious alien or easily identifiable evil such as Jabba the Hutt, Darth Vader, or the Emperor. As the son of two of our beloved heroes, Kylo Ren forces us to look for the evil in those we are close to rather than the evil that we can so easily pick out in those we consider
different from us, and in terms of contemporary issues surrounding racial justice, civil violence, Islamophobia, and political turmoil, the choice to make the film’s villain someone who does not play on any negative non-white racial stereotypes is a very important one.

Perhaps most intriguing, however, are the questions that *The Force Awakens* leaves us with as far as how otherness fits in the future of the *Star Wars* saga. Finn’s past, aside from a brief part about being taken at a young age, is still very much of a mystery, and for someone brought up in such a disciplinarian society, he seems to break free of his past life remarkably cleanly, with no episodes of post-traumatic stress or other outward symptoms of how his past life might be affecting him. Is there anything in his past that compels him to take such a brave leap of faith in abandoning the first order, and if so, how does it fit into the narrative of otherness? Who is Rey’s family that she was so ardently waiting for, and does her narrative cross with those of past *Star Wars* heroes? Similarly, what caused Kylo Ren to actively seek out and cultivate an identity of otherness for himself, and where did his strong sense of privilege and entitlement come from? How did Poe Dameron and BB-8 come together and in the service of the Resistance, and is there anything in his past regarding otherness that has shaped his life? And what of Maz Kanata; how did she come to know and sense the Force while not being a Jedi herself, and how does her history align with other prominent alien figures of *Star Wars*? If history is any indication, we will find out in the next several *Star Wars* films, but for now, those films feel much like the supposed galaxy in which they take place: far, far away.
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104


