http://eprints.gla.ac.uk/195627/

Deposited on: 18 September 2019

Gender, Race and Representation in the Star Wars Franchise: An Introduction

On its release in 2015, the first Disney Star Wars film *The Force Awakens* transformed the franchise by featuring a young white woman and a black man as its protagonists. Following six feature films that mostly focused on white male characters, Rey and Finn took centre stage, and many fans celebrated what they saw as greater gender and racial diversity in the film series. However, a number of people identifying as Star Wars fans shared their anger about the inclusion of women and people of colour in the franchise. On social media platforms such as Twitter, debates raged between different groups who claimed that the films were finally getting gender and race representation right – or doing it too much.

Scholars such as bell hooks and Kimberlé Crenshaw discuss how unequal treatment of people according to their gender and race are forms of oppression that have severe, negative impacts on people's lives. Both argue that gender, race and class are interconnected, or 'intersectional,' and limit people's choices to different degrees (hooks, 1994: 5; Crenshaw, 1991: 1241). hooks suggests that we should pay attention to how popular culture in general, and film in particular, represents gender and race because people engage more critically with social problems when they are visible (hooks, 1990: 6). Star Wars, therefore, as a franchise with international visibility and a vocal fanbase that discusses identity and representation, makes a useful case study. And, spanning a forty-two-year period between 1977 and the present day, it shows us how attitudes toward identity have changed over time. In this article, then, I investigate the (to date) ten canon Star Wars films, alongside film criticism and fan commentary, to argue that despite some positive changes, it has not yet provided equality for women and people of colour on screen.

'Fan backlash'
Following the release of *The Force Awakens* and *The Last Jedi* (2018), news media have paid considerable attention to a perceived 'backlash' against diverse casting in Star Wars. According to journalist Rebecca Hawkes in the *Daily Telegraph*, '[w]hile most fans were pretty excited to see Boyega in the trailer [for *The Force Awakens*], others took to Twitter to voice their dissatisfaction that a black man had been cast as a stormtrooper' (2014). Prior to the release of *The Last Jedi* some sexist and racist people called on fans to boycott the film; after its release, one man angry about the representation of strong women characters edited them all out of the movie using digital software (Holland, *Guardian*, 2018). Stars of *The Last Jedi* Kelly Marie Tran, John Boyega and Daisey Ridley (Rose, Finn and Rey, respectively) also faced online bullying (Chuba, *Variety*, 2018). As a result, cast members such as Oscar Isaac decried the racist attitude displayed by some commentators (Hawkes, *Daily Telegraph*), and Tran and Ridley said they felt forced to delete their social media accounts (anonymous, *BBC News*, 2018).

Academic William Proctor proposes that people are upset about changes to what he calls 'canonical fidelity,' because a black man appearing as a stormtrooper may challenge viewers' ideas about continuity within the story. In the first six films, stormtroopers have their faces concealed behind masks, and Proctor's study suggests that some viewers assumed the characters were white (2018: 162). Moreover, film critic Todd VanDerWerff records people complaining that in *The Last Jedi*, 'the film's strongest characters are almost all women, who usually know the right thing to do, while its most evil characters are white

men with complexes about being given what they think they deserve' (*Vox*, 2017). While original good-guy Luke appears in the film, and women characters such as Captain Phasma are affiliated with the 'Dark Side,' Proctor and VanDerWerff's analyses suggest that the films' shift away from representing white men in positive roles is controversial for some viewers.

Other studies, for instance Morten Bay's, contend that online sexism and racism about *The Last Jedi* is often not produced by Star Wars fans at all, but rather by fake Twitter accounts organised by political institutions to hijack public debate and spread fear (2018: 3). Proctor similarly questions the scale of the problem and says that news media are over-emphasising the gender and race-based backlash (2018: 161). Both Bay and Proctor make valid points – however, their investigations refer to relatively small sample sizes. Bay examined tweets about *The Last Jedi* aimed at director Rian Johnson on July 20, 2018 and did not investigate messages sent to women or people of colour involved in the film. His dataset was 967 tweets. Meanwhile Proctor's sample only includes tweets on one hashtag (#Blackstormtrooper) over thirteen days, and he does not include quantitative data about the sample size to substantiate his claims. Also, he does not consider that being upset about a black man appearing in a film because of 'canonical fidelity' is a form of racism in itself, because it excludes people from the story based on the colour of their skin. As Bethany Lacina's wider study reveals, racist and sexist tweets about the franchise do not tend to be generated by politically affiliated or fake accounts (*Washington Post*, 2018). Lacina analysed 'thousands' of tweets that included the search terms 'Star Wars' and 'The Last Jedi,' and so was able to capture a broader range of attitudes that were not limited to the white male director (Johnson) or one provocative hashtag (#BlackStormtrooper). Her research shows that female characters and actresses, and characters and performers of colour, are bullied far more than their white male counterparts in discussions about Star Wars.

Star Wars and Gender

By examining the onscreen representation of women and people of colour in the Star Wars canon feature films, I challenge arguments about 'canonical fidelity' that excuse sexism and racism among viewers. For while there were no visibly black stormtroopers (or any racially visible Stormtroopers, for that matter) before Finn, or female Jedi in a lead role before Rey, the movies have featured diverse characters. Women include Mon Mothma and Beru (Caroline Blakiston and Bonnie Piesse respectively in the original trilogy), Jamillia and Zam Wessell (Ayesha Dharker and Leeanna Walsman in the prequels), and Captain Phasma and Jyn Erso (played by Gwendoline Christie and Felicity Jones in the sequels and spin-offs). *Solo* (2018) features two women of colour, Val (Thandie Newton) and Enfys Nest (Erin Kellyman), while Maz Kanata is a CGI character played by Lupita Nyong'o. And there are men of colour throughout the franchise, such as Mace Windu (Samuel L Jackson), Jango Fett (Temuera Morrison), and Jar Jar Binx (another digitally rendered character, played by Ahmed Best). Thus, audience members are used to seeing people with marginalised identities in the Star Wars universe.

However, the inclusion of different genders and races does not necessarily mean the franchise does not perpetuate sexism and racism, as the quality of representation matters just as much as the quantity of women or people of colour that appear on screen. For example, Leia is a significant figure in the original trilogy and sequels and plays a vital role in

the narrative. She is the first named character to appear in the *A New Hope* in 1977, and she appears variously as a princess, senator and general throughout the franchise. Similarly, Padmé, Leia's onscreen mother, is an elected queen and senator in the prequels. Both women demonstrate strong leadership and courage.

In her analysis of the original trilogy, however, Diana Dominguez argues that Leia's character serves male characters like Luke (2007: 109-133). For example, she prioritises his grief about losing his aunt and uncle over the destruction of her adopted parents and planet). Carolyn Cocca further complicates the debate, arguing that while Leia and Padmé 'subvert binary gender roles and stereotypes' as 'independent, competent, shrewd, and respected leaders,' they are 'exceptionally privileged' in terms of race and class. And—unlike their male colleagues—they are sexualised (2016: 87-88). Cocca's analysis demonstrates how gender, race and class intersect and provide people with power in different ways. On the one hand, the two women are white, wealthy and enjoy certain privileges. On the other, they are objectified and depicted in revealing clothes. But while Leia appears in a bikini in *Return of the Jedi* (1983), it is Padmé, perhaps surprisingly, who appears more frequently in overtly feminine and revealing costumes, such as a cropped top that she wears in battle during *Attack of the Clones* (2002). Although people often assume that representation continually improves over time, the more recent film portrays women in a more, rather than less, sexualised way. Additionally, my own research shows that women with speaking roles spend less time on screen in the prequels than the original trilogy. By editing the films to focus on female characters with speaking parts, I found that women had just 20% of screen time in *The Phantom Menace* (1999), 18% in *Attack of the Clones*, and 17% in *Revenge of the Sith* (2005). Comparably, earlier releases *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980) and *Return of the Jedi* (1983) were more favourable to women, on 22 and 23% (Harrison, *Writing on Reels*, 2018).

The slight drop in female characters' screen time in the prequels is likely attributable to the postfeminist ideology prevalent in western culture in the early 2000s. Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra suggest that the movement led some women to think that they no longer needed feminism because they had achieved equality by being free to make decisions (2007: 1-26). The rise of fourth-wave feminism since 2012 (evident in world-wide annual Women's Marches) may account for an improvement in the statistics for the sequels and spin-offs. *The Last Jedi* scores highest on 43%, and female characters like Rey, Jyn and Rose wearing more comfortable and less sexualised costumes. On the one hand, the Disney-era films (that is, post-2014 releases) have improved the representation of women characters, with more screen time and women in positions of leadership (such as *The Last Jedi's* Vice-Admiral Holdo, played by Laura Dern). On the other, there is still a limited range of roles for women, with protagonists Rey and Jyn styled to look like a young Leia (Carrie Fisher) with similar hair and costumes. And with under 50% of screen time, women in the Star Wars films remain unequal with their male counterparts.

Star Wars and Race
Although I have not yet compiled data regarding screen time for people of colour in the films, carrying out textual analysis suggests the post-2015 Disney-era movies have also improved in terms of race representation. The first major character of colour in the franchise was Lando Calrissian, played by black actor Billy Dee Williams in *The Empire Strikes Back* and *Return of the Jedi*. Alongside Leia, Lando flies the *Millennium Falcon* ship, rescues

his friend Han from the criminal Jabba the Hutt, and destroys the Death Star to help save the galaxy. But on screen, Lando is reminiscent of characters in the Blaxploitation movie genre, and film critic Janet Maslin complained in 1980 that Williams was reduced to a racial stereotype (*New York Times*, 1980: 25). As a flirtatious gambler and swindler who double-crosses his white friends, and with dandified and ostentatious costuming (he famously wears a brightly-coloured cape at odds with the sedate white, beige and brown clothing of Leia of Han), Maslin's critique is justified.

In the prequels, the character Jar-Jar Binx relies on even more overt racism, with an accent codified as the patois of a black Caribbean man that is played for laughs (for example, he speaks in an exaggeratedly childlike manner and is physically clumsy). In doing so, it perpetuates racist stereotypes about black men's perceived incompetence and low intellect. The films also feature a clone army that is based on the genetic code of a character of colour, Jango Fett (played by actor Temuera Morrison). The clones are genetically modified by scientists and built to be physically strong, serving no purpose other than fighting for others – mostly under the control of white men like Emperor Palpatine. Consequently, the clones are reminiscent of African-American people born into slavery in the USA in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Yet because the films ultimately align the clone army with the Dark Side (they carry out orders to kill the Jedi) and treat them as a single entity rather than individuals, the prequels contribute to, rather than critique, the racism of slavery.

By comparison, the sequels and spin-offs offer more nuance than the prequels, and more opportunities for performers of colour than the original trilogy. Finn is joined in the sequels by Latino actor Oscar Isaac as heroic Poe Dameron, as well as the courageous Rose. Aside from Jyn, the ensemble main cast of the spin-off *Rogue One* (2016) is comprised entirely by men of colour, including British Asian actor Riz Ahmed, while *Solo* features Val and Enfys Nest. Nevertheless, as with the representation of women, the issue of race bears more scrutiny, especially as the spin-offs tend to kill off or erase their most diverse cast members. The deaths of the team in *Rogue One* and Val in *Solo* render the lives of people of colour expendable in the pursuit of saving white characters; in the sequels, the body of black actress Lupita Nyong'o is rendered invisible by her CGI character Maz.

Conclusion
Despite claims to the contrary by angry commentators online, the Star Wars films have featured women and people of colour in lead roles since the original trilogy, with Carrie Fisher and Billy Dee Williams appearing as Leia and Lando. Although their representation has not been consistent, with the prequels in particular sexualising women and reducing characters of colour to slave stereotypes, diverse casts have appeared throughout the franchise. What news media describe as a 'fan backlash' to characters like Finn and Rose cannot be excused by Proctor's theory of 'canonical fidelity' because doing so ignores the many women and people of colour who previously existed in the Star Wars universe.

Even the most recent sequels and spin-offs, though, fail to give an equal share of screen time to women with speaking roles, and characters of colour are frequently killed off. As scholar Megen de Bruin-Molé argues, 'Star Wars tends to follow mainstream politics rather than revolutionary ones' (2017: 225). Her claim is in keeping with the representation of

women in the prequels being postfeminist, and in the sequels aligning with fourth-wave feminism, and it suggests that until society is more equal Star Wars will continue to depict gender and race unfairly. As my research into screen time for women reveals that there is a correlation between the representation of female characters and broader cultural phenomenon (such as post- and fourth-wave feminism), de Bruin-Molé's argument appears to hold weight.

Of course, there are other arenas of the Star Wars universe that complicate any investigation into identity and representation. For example, in my broader project I am also examining labour practices and the number of women and people of colour involved in production to determine who makes decisions about the franchise. Furthermore, analysing the paratexts, such as canon novels, reveals a more inclusive and LGBTQ+ friendly space, with openly gay, lesbian and non-binary characters such as Sinjir and Taka who do not appear in the films (Wendig, 2016; Older, 2018). Evidently, there is scope to improve diversity in the films further, and my research will continue to interrogate the representation of gender, race, and other identities (such as sexuality and disability) in the franchise's production, exhibition and aesthetics. In the classroom, though, the inequalities of the Star Wars cinematic universe provide a useful case study through which to discuss the complex and often subtle ways that discrimination continues to shape people's everyday lives both on and off the screen.

Works Cited

Bay, M. (2018). *Weaponizing the Haters: The Last Jedi and the Strategic Politicization of Pop Culture through Social Media Manipulation*. [online] First Monday. Available at: https://firstmonday.org/ojs/index.php/fm/article/view/9388

Chuba, K. (2018). *Star Wars' Actress Kelly Marie Tran Leaves Social Media After Months of Harassment*. [online] Variety. Available at: https://variety.com/2018/biz/news/star-wars-kelly-marie-tran-leaves-social-media-harassment-1202830892/

Crenshaw, K. (1991). Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color. *Stanford Law Review*, 43(6), pp.1241-1299.

Hawkes, R. (2019). *Star Wars' Oscar Isaac addresses 'black stormtrooper' controversy*. [online] Telegraph.co.uk. Available at: https://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/star-wars/11275974/Star-Wars-Oscar-Isaac-addresses-black-stormtrooper-controversy.html.

Holland, L. (2019). *Why Are (Some) Star Wars Fans So Toxic?*. [online] Guardian. Available at: https://www.theguardian.com/film/2018/jun/07/kelly-marie-tran-rose-why-are-some-star-wars-fans-so-toxic.

hooks, b. (1994). *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. London: Pluto Press.

hooks, b. (1990). *Yearning: Race, Gender and Cultural Politics*. London: South End Press.

Lacina, B. (2018). *Who Hates Star Wars for its Newfound Diversity? Here are the Numbers*. [online] Washington Post. Available at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-

cage/wp/2018/09/06/who-hates-star-wars-for-its-newfound-diversity-here-are-the-numbers/?utm_term=.7f0026e7481b

Proctor, W. (2018). 'I've Seen a Lot of Talk About the #BlackStormtrooper Outrage, But Not a Single Example of Anyone Complaining': *The Force Awakens*, Canonical Fidelity and Non-Toxic Fan Practices. *Participations Journal of Audience and Reception Studies* 15(1), pp.160-180.

VanDerWerff, T. (2017). *The 'Backlash' Against Star Wars: The Last Jedi, Explained*. [online] Vox.com. Available at: https://www.vox.com/culture/2017/12/18/16791844/star-wars-last-jedi-backlash-controversy