

# Resisting Their Programming

## *Clones, Droids, and the Regulation of Life in a Galaxy Far, Far Away*

Chera Kee

After Disney's purchase of Lucasfilm in 2012, *Star Wars: The Clone Wars* was one of the few non-film properties to remain in canon. This may be because "Unlike previous Star Wars television projects, Lucas himself was heavily involved in the art style [and] stories...of this show" (Nardi and Sweet, 3). The show debuted on Cartoon Network in 2008, moving to Netflix for a sixth season in 2014. In 2020, the series was revived for a seventh and final season on Disney+. *The Clone Wars* expanded the storylines from the prequel films, filling in the three years between *Attack of the Clones* (2002) and *Revenge of the Sith* (2005). It introduced new characters into the *Star Wars* universe and provided more in-depth characterizations to minor characters from the prequel films, most especially the clone soldiers themselves.

While not entirely focused on the lives of the clone soldiers, *The Clone Wars* does offer multiple storylines that explore the clones' experiences. Yet, while the show goes a long way towards showing the clones' personhood, it also works to strip that personhood away. In many ways, this sets the clones up as parallels to the many droid characters who populate the *Star Wars* universe. Droids are mechanical beings that work in a number of service roles in the galaxy, from the astromechs that help fly ships to the protocol droids, such as C3-PO. While droids are non-organic, they are often programmed with artificial intelligence, and as *Wookieepedia* relates, "Most droids possess...a form of self-awareness, with advanced models even having emotions such as fear for their existence" ("Droid"). Thus, most droids exist as, at once, individualized and invested with all of the trappings of humanity while also often being treated as (expendable) tools. This is the exact space in which the clones find themselves, even as they serve alongside the Jedi for the Galactic Republic.

Within the *Star Wars* universe, clones are the forerunners of Stormtroopers, even serving as the initial batch of Stormtroopers when the Empire takes over, yet there is a key difference between the two. While both clones and Stormtroopers wear the exact same armor, clones were designed and created to serve the Republic in its fight against Separatists, while Stormtroopers—after their initial iteration as clones—were recruited soldiers. Yet, even if they aren't exactly the same, memories of Stormtroopers haunt representations of clones. In the original trilogy, we don't see any Stormtrooper take off their helmet; in the sequel trilogy, we only ever see Finn remove his armor. The fact that audiences never see the humans underneath the armor lends to the overwhelming sameness of Stormtroopers. That, coupled with the fact that they are "bad guys," works to make them over as nearly robotic. They are also often presented in large groups, where it is easy to lose individuals in the sea of uniformity. This sense of homogeneity plagues the clones as well. While in the prequel films, viewers can see under their armor, the clones are all identical, serving mainly in the background. While some of them move to the foreground in *The Clone Wars*, this idea of sameness remains.

Not only do they look alike, but there is a strong push for clones to fit into the group. In season three of *The Clone Wars*, Jedi Master Shaak-Ti, who oversees clone training on Kamino, tells a squad of trainees, "I am a Jedi, where the individual and the group are one and the same. Much like you clones." She later admonishes the group to "Solve your problems as a whole, not

as individuals” (“Clone Cadets”). Shaak-Ti’s comparison rings a bit hollow, given members of the Jedi Order may freely opt in or out, unlike clones who are born into a system on Kamino that doesn’t present any opportunities for escape, yet the idea is clear—clones are supposed to function as a unit.

However, as Derek R. Sweet observes, “From the outset, *The Clone Wars* makes an argument for the individuality of genetically identical troopers” (50). Not only do clones personalize their armor, but some have unique tattoos; others dye or cut their hair. This allows viewers to easily identify key clone characters, and Sweet argues the individualization also suggests “a degree of autonomy, of individual identity, on the part of the clones” (51). But this individualization is often at odds with the narrative uses to which clones are put on the show, as there may be clone individuals but that does not mean that individual clones have much power over their lives.

Considering the lack of autonomy the clones have over their lives, this essay seeks to explore the clones’ personhood and their relationship to *bare life*, suggesting that getting to see under the helmets of these soldiers allows viewers a chance to humanize figures that throughout the *Star Wars* films have been consistently de-humanized. Yet, while *The Clone Wars* humanizes clones, its exploration of the ethical dilemmas of war and of cloning mask the ways in which the clones are also continually made over as objects. Thus, the show promotes the idea of resisting one’s biopolitical fate while making it clear that the clones are unable to do so.

## The Bare Life

In order to better understand the clones, it is useful to explore how Giorgio Agamben uses the concepts *zoē* and *bios* to explain how sovereign states manufacture situations in which they can kill without impunity. In the simplest terms, *zoē* is a state of simply being alive, whereas *bios* is the “way of living proper to an individual or group” (1). What this means is “a life that is...given meaning through participation in culture and politics” (Edgar, 50). Thus, while most living organisms have *zoē*, not all achieve *bios*, or a political existence. But in all societies where *bios* is attainable, there is always the danger that one may lose their claims to it. For Agamben, this person doesn’t simply become reduced to *zoē*; they become a figure called *homo sacer*, someone stripped down to the condition of *bare life*.

Ikram Masmoudi describes the circumstances in which states produce *bare life*, noting:

sovereign states exempt themselves [from] their laws against killing and torture and in the name of the state can kill people through capital punishment, death in detention, and death by torture or in war...Today...wars give the sovereign the capacity to kill with immunity, so that the sovereign is not committing homicide and cannot be punished for a crime. The sovereign’s actions create new forms of life where individuals are exposed, targeted and exterminated in camps, whether they find immediate death or linger in a space between life and death...where they are less than human (6).

The state can thus mark off situations where killing is “necessary” and the types of people who are killable under the pretense of protecting the larger population.

Although today all people potentially may be exposed to *bare life*, some occupy this space much more firmly than others. The unhoused, racial and religious minorities, and immigrants are especially vulnerable. Soldiers are also exposed to *bare life*. As Masmoudi notes, they “are doomed to a living death in the context of the lawlessness of war” (19). Yet, for many soldiers, there is choice involved. They willingly enter *bare life* in order “to fight, kill, be injured, and die on the nation’s behalf” (MacLeish, 275). They forfeit the sanctity of their lives so the wider population may live.

Unlike many real-world soldiers, though, the clones of the *Star Wars* universe have no choice in entering the *bare life*. As viewers learn in the prequel films, the clones serve as the army for the Republic during the war with the Separatists. They are manufactured on the planet Kamino from the modified genetic material of Jango Fett to fight the Separatists' droid army. As manufactured soldiers, clones always already exist outside the realm of *bios*, and there is no path the clones can follow to raise them to it. In fact, the Republic depends on them remaining in the state of *bare life*.

## The Clones who are Different

While clones are bred to be soldiers, not all clones turn out as expected. “Bad-batch-ers,” are clones who are defective and thus won’t end up as soldiers. They instead serve maintenance duty for the Kamonians.<sup>1</sup> Before season seven, the most famous Bad-batch-er was 99, who “was malformed in the cloning process...and suffered numerous genetic and physical defects” (“99”). 99 is a tender mentor to clone cadets training on Kamino, and he eventually sacrifices himself for those cadets and other clones during a Separatist invasion. As 99 dies, clone Commander Cody remarks, “We lost a true soldier.” Clone Captain Rex replies “He really was one of us” (“ARC Troopers”). Rex’s statement legitimizes 99 as a “true” clone, but in the context of Cody’s remark, it also legitimizes 99 as a soldier, which seems to be the important aspect of identity here. For while any given clone may change his hair or his armor, *all* clones are expected to be soldiers.

We see this in season two in an episode entitled “The Deserter.” Here, viewers meet Cut Lawquane, a clone who left the Republic army and has a new life as a farmer and a father. This is the first instance in the series where we meet a clone who is not a soldier, and when Captain Rex meets Lawquane, he immediately calls him a deserter. Lawquane responds, “Well, I’d like to think I’m merely exercising my freedom to choose. To choose not to kill for a living.” Rex responds, “That is not your choice to make” (“The Deserter”). Rex’s statement is curious as he doesn’t say who has the right to make that choice. Implicitly, we can guess he means the Republic or the Kaminoians.

But Lawquane isn’t just advocating for clones to be able to choose their own path in life; he’s also taking a stance about the war itself. In describing why he left the clone army, Lawquane says, “I was just another expendable clone waiting for my turn to be slaughtered in a war that made no sense to me” (“The Deserter”). Lawquane isn’t pushing back against being a clone; he is questioning his position *as a soldier* who had no say in the war he was fighting. Lawquane challenges Rex: “... admit it. You’ve thought about what your life could look like if you could...leave the army, choose a life you wanted.” Rex is defensive, answering, “What if I am choosing the life I want?” Lawquane wonders if that is Rex’s programming talking. Rex says, “No, Cut. It’s simply what I believe” (“The Deserter”).

Sweet maintains this episode illustrates how “*The Clone Wars* presents a situation whereby individuality is largely respected but self-determination is restricted” (54). As he notes, “This depiction of individuals who think and act of their own accord, who recognize they are not unthinking automatons like the enemies they often face and yet ultimately possess little or no self-determination is one of the most tragic points brought to light by *The Clone Wars*” (55). Part of the tragedy is many clones believe they do have a choice. Rex clearly does.

Rex is one of the most prominent clone characters throughout the series, and having him act as Lawquane’s foil means more than pitting two contrasting views against each other. Rex is not

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<sup>1</sup> While in most *Clone Wars* episodes, Bad batch-ers can’t be soldiers, by season seven, there is Clone Force 99, named in honor of the clone known as 99, and colloquially known as the “Bad Batch.” It is populated with genetically mutated clones. This group serves as the premise for the subsequent Disney+ show, *The Bad Batch* (2021-present).

only the epitome of a clone soldier, but he is a recognizable individual. Thus, Lawquane’s quip that Rex’s programming is talking runs less authentic than it might with another clone because the viewer has been given opportunities to see Rex as an individual. Moreover, while Rex claims that he genuinely wants to serve, viewers will see him question this over the course of the series, suggesting that rather than “programming,” many clones may simply never realize that there is an outside to which they can aspire.

This is also clear in the narrative arc of the clone Gregor. In season five, a group of droids led by a small Zilkin named Meebur Gascon end up in a desolate desert town and meet Gregor, a humanoid working at the local diner. The group soon realize he is a clone trooper suffering from amnesia and tricked into believing he owes the local diner owner his service. The droids and Gascon help Gregor escape and find his clone armor. They then convince him to assist in their mission. Even though his memory hasn’t returned, Gregor agrees, going so far as to say, “This is what I was born to do” (“Missing in Action”). Here, self-determination is turned on its head—Gregor’s supposed “freedom” from being a clone soldier is slavery to the diner owner, and he only regains his real “freedom” when he re-joins the Republic’s cause. Gregor’s choice seems to imply that clones either don’t want to be free of their service as soldiers or they are somehow incapable of making a life outside the Republic army work.

Gregor’s later narrative trajectory recontextualizes this, though. Gregor reappears in *Star Wars: Rebels* (2014-2018), living with Rex and Commander Wolffe about fifteen years after the Clone Wars. Gregor eventually joins the Rebel Alliance with Rex. As he dies during the Liberation of Lothal, he says, “It was an honor to serve with you, Rex. It was an honor to fight with you for something we *chose* to believe in” (“Family Reunion and Farewell”). Gregor’s emphasis on choice implies he didn’t have a choice before—that his service in the Clone Wars wasn’t freely given—and again suggests that the clones are coerced into service (even if many don’t realize it).

## Programmable Soldiers

On *The Clone Wars*, clones are often addressed in technical language or placed in droid-like situations that further work to chip away at their agency. As Richard Hanley notes, the clones “are genetically manipulated to reduce their autonomy, to make them a bit more like droids than you and I are” (97). The linkage between clones and droids is often couched in the terms of “programming,” and the fact that the clones are grown in a lab and that they all have inhibitor chips implanted in their brains bolsters the sense that they aren’t fully human. Viewers of *The Clone Wars* familiar with the prequel films know that because of the chips, the clones are programmed to enact Order 66 at some point in the future, overriding any comradeship they have with the Jedi so that Palpatine can eliminate the Jedi Order once and for all.

In season six, clone soldier Tup’s chip malfunctions and triggers Order 66 early. He kills a Jedi during battle. Tup is sent to Kamino to see what’s wrong. While there, Tup and his buddy, Fives, uncover the existence of the chips and discover they aren’t what the Kaminoians say they are. Fives begins investigating the inhibitor chips accompanied by a droid named AZI-3, and the two of them act as doubles of each other. AZI-3 points out they are both just “numbers,” addressing the similarities in how clones and droids are designated. But Fives protests that he has a nickname. His designation may be CT-5555, but everyone calls him “Fives.” Later, as both AZI-3 and Fives are being escorted away by their respective handlers, the droid tells Fives they’re both on their way to be reprogrammed, again making the parallels between droids and clones clear—they’re both machines that can be programmed and reprogrammed at will. The base material—whether organic or inorganic—and the ability of either of these beings to achieve personhood is irrelevant.

The language used to describe clones in these episodes is also telling. Tup is “defective.” He had a “malfunction.” Fives argues at one point, “I’m not hardware; I’m a human being”

(“Fugitive”). There is even an argument between Jedi Master Shaak-Ti and the Kaminoians, where they disagree about the clones’ status as “property.” Do they belong to the Kaminoian government or the Republic? When Fives realizes the Kaminoians are going to let Tup die, he says, “We were not created to be disposed of this way” (“Conspiracy”). This gets to the issue: clones are hyper-aware of their liminal status as beings *created* to be soldiers. But when he says, “We were not created to be disposed of this way,” AZI-3 responds, “Perhaps you were. CT-5385 will be terminated so that others like him could survive.” Fives yells back, “There aren’t others like him” (“Conspiracy”). The sad fact is, in the eyes of the Republic, the Jedi, and the Separatists, there are.

So how are clones and droids fundamentally different in terms of their rights within their respective systems? There doesn’t seem to be a clear answer—often characters coded as evil are the most likely to treat droids and clones as objects, but this ignores the fact that you must imagine these beings as objects to craft and manufacture them in the manner and scale the Republic and Separatists do in the first place. Ultimately, the issue is that early in the *Star Wars* universe, Lucas and other creators opted to give droids personalities, humanizing them, but they also used droids and droid-like beings, such as Stormtroopers, as objects the good guys could kill without impunity.

To illustrate this back and forth, in season seven, Mace Windu gives a speech to a group of the Separatists’ battle droids, the RO-GRs, better known as “Rogers.” He says,

My name is General Mace Windu of the Jedi Order. At this point of the Clone War, I have dismantled and destroyed over one-hundred thousand of you type-one battle droids. I am giving you an opportunity to peacefully lay down your weapons so that you may be reprogrammed to serve a better purpose than spreading the mindless violence and chaos which you have inflicted upon the galaxy (“Unfinished Business”).

Windu is addressing the droids as equals and gives them an opportunity to make a choice. This seems to recognize the droids have some level of autonomous thinking ability, which would suggest some level of free will on their part. But the second part of his offer, “so that you may be reprogrammed,” suggests something different—the droids cannot be trusted to think freely and need reprogramming. The first part of the offer acknowledges the droids’ ability to reason on their own, while the second part either denies that ability or suggests it needs to be shut down immediately.

This is supposed to be a funny moment before the fighting starts. But this speech gets to the heart of things, which is neither the clones nor the droids have bodily autonomy. While we can suggest the Roger droids are “evil,” that ignores the fact that they are programmed. If they are truly machines, with no ability to think independently, then they can’t be good or evil. They are simply doing what they’ve been programmed to do. If the droids are good or evil, then we must accept the droids can move beyond or ignore their programming, in which case, a lot of what happens in the *Clone Wars* becomes a very chilling tale of how little “life” is worth when it isn’t on the right side of things.

The plain fact of the matter is that many droids in the *Star Wars* universe express intelligence, independent thought, and emotion. For instance, Roger battle droids often scream when they’re in danger, express noises of fear, and even use humor. Furthermore, as Sweet observes, “some *Star Wars* droids establish interpersonal relationships with both mechanical and biological beings, possess a high degree of emotional intelligence, and make ethical decisions grounded in compassion” (168). Yet, while certain droids’ claims to personhood are strong, not all droids are created equal, suggesting the value of a droid’s life is less in its possession of certain criteria demarcating personhood and more about viewers knowing it individually: thus, while audiences might be aghast at the idea that Luke Skywalker’s beloved R2-D2 could be killed, they can see any number of nameless droids explode without worry. In the end, it is the same with the clones.

## Not Meant to Win

In the real world, soldiers are bodies by proxy; they expose their bodies to death so the larger population remains safe, at least in theory. So, soldiers exist in *bare life*. But if the soldiers are cloned, created expressly for *bare life*, how much do things change? Does their status as clones somehow change the question of why the Republic is okay with exposing its soldiers to death? Does the fact these living beings are manufactured change their status—would the Republic’s soldiers not be exposed to *bare life* if they were conscripted recruits?

If *The Clone Wars* is using clones to comment on the *bare life* of soldiers more generally—using the clones’ status as manufactured beings to illuminate the ways in which contemporary soldiers are in essence, “cloned” beings—this runs into two problems. While individualization is possible, in creating a uniform fighting force (save from cosmetic differences among individual soldiers), ultimately the clones end up being used as objects. They are blown up, shot, and killed to fill backgrounds and create a dramatic landscape. For those clones whose faces we don’t see and whose names we never learn, individualization is irrelevant, because the point of them is to provide objects to help propel stories forward.

Secondly, in creating armies for the Separatists and Republic that show little, if any, diversity among the ranks, *The Clone Wars* ends up suggesting clones, and by extension real-world soldiers, are droid-like.<sup>2</sup> This is underscored by Order 66, which shows almost every clone unable to act against his programming. In many ways, Order 66 serves to undercut any previous argument about the clones’ personhood that rests on their differences from droids. But this gets to the deeper point, which is, it is much easier to digest the realities of war if you can strip the combatants on both sides of their humanity. Otherwise, the gravity of having some bodies die for others sinks in.

Those characters most honest about the true nature of droids and clones are often painted as villains—and their villainy is underscored by their bad treatment of clones and droids. For example, in season four, while the 501<sup>st</sup> is fighting on Umbra, they are temporarily under the command of Jedi General Krell. Krell insults the clones, refuses to call them by their nicknames, and doesn’t mind sacrificing them to enact his plans. While he is clearly marked as a bad guy, one could view him as treating the clones like what they truly are: weapons to be used in the war. Yet, this arc tries—and ultimately fails—to suggest that to most of the Jedi and other “good guys,” clones are individuals and not merely cannon fodder. In the final episode of the arc, Krell reveals himself as a Separatist traitor, so the show suggests that only the Separatists treat clones this way. But the question then becomes, how do the Republic and the Jedi justify the creation of a clone army in the first place? They are creating these beings to be soldiers, and nothing else, so why not treat them as things? Wouldn’t that make their inevitable deaths easier?

In some ways, this is exactly what the show does. As Sweet notes, “With the exception of Captain Rex, Commander Cody, and a handful of clones introduced in one particular storyline or another, clones are anonymous and disposable” (56). We see this in gruesome detail at the end of the Umbra arc. The clone soldiers know Krell is a traitor and are trying to bring him in. Krell goes on a killing spree that makes his point. He starts killing clones, and in his wake, there are dozens of bodies. They are all wearing nearly identical armor and exist within this narrative to be Krell’s cannon fodder, which turns them into the very sort of disposable objects the episode tries to state they aren’t. Krell’s killing spree is chilling because it turns clone troopers into nameless robots designed to be killed, flipping the episode’s argument back onto itself. In the end, either the clones are living beings with full personhood, or they are objects, meaning there

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<sup>2</sup> The clones are based on actor Temuera Morrison, who is Māori, so an argument could also be made that the clone army is made up of racial minorities, but they aren’t recognized as such in universe.

should be no ethical concerns in exposing them to the *bare life*. But the Republic seems to want to have it both ways.

Even clones must grapple with this. In season seven, before Order 66, Rex talks about the war with Ahsoka Tano. He notes, “Gives us clones mixed feelings...Many people wish it never happened. But without it, we clones wouldn't exist” (“Shattered”). That leads to a question that comes up throughout the series—what are clones meant to do when and if the war ends? While *The Bad Batch*, which premiered on Disney+ in May 2021, seeks to answer this, within the world of *The Clone Wars*, the answer seems to be—there is no outside to being a soldier. That is what the clones were made to do and what they'll continue to do until they're no longer useful to whoever is currently in power.

Rex confronts this at the end of season seven when he and Ahsoka face off against dozens of clones operating under Order 66. Trying to escape from a ship that is crashing, Ahsoka doesn't want to kill any clones to save herself. Rex is willing to if it means saving Ahsoka and himself. He tells Ahsoka, “This ship is going down, and those soldiers, my brothers, are willing to die and take you and me along with them.” Ahsoka tells him, “You're a good soldier, Rex, so is every one of those men down there. They may be willing to die, but I am not the one who is going to kill them” (“Victory and Death”). This shows us Ahsoka's strong moral compass, but Rex is right. The clones are programmed to kill Ahsoka and Rex, and if they don't fight back, they will die. Within the *Star Wars* narrative universe, the Separatists see the clone army as “a biological abomination” and believe their droid army is much more “humane” (“Clone Trooper”). The underlying joke is that there is very little separating droids from clones. Would Ahsoka's speech to Rex play much differently if the two were facing off against C-3PO, R2-D2, and BB-8?

In the third season of *Star Wars: Rebels*, Kanan, Ezra, Zeb, and Rex confront a group of Separatist droids who weren't shut down at the end of the Clone Wars. The leader of the droids challenges the humanoids to a final war game to prove the droids were superior. Facing off with the droid leader after having made their way through his compound, Ezra starts asking questions. He wonders if the Jedi were killed, the clone soldiers de-commissioned, and the droids shut down, who actually won the Clone War. Later, he concludes: “none of you were meant to win” (“The Last Battle”)

That, ultimately, is the truth of the matter. Neither side in this war values *all* life. Both have clear lines separating those with the right to live from those who are expected to die, and those existing on the side of *bare life* are overwhelmingly clones and droids. Moreover, neither side is meant to win this war, which means the loss of droids and clones is mostly for spectacle. By including episodes where characters question the clones' personhood, *The Clone Wars* makes it seem as if the moral discussion revolves around that—but that discussion obfuscates the reality, which is, no matter their personhood, clones always already exist in *bare life*. They were never meant to be anywhere else.

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