
“WE’RE NOT MARAUDERS, WE’RE ALLIES”

An Intersectional History of US Feminism & *Star Wars*

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In recent years, *Star Wars*, like many mainstream pop culture franchises in the US, has come under scrutiny for its lack of diversity. Characters throughout all ten of the films have been overwhelmingly white; main characters have been predominantly male; and as far as we know, most romances have been heteronormatively framed. In an attempt to address these kinds of critiques, more actors of color have been cast in starring roles in the latest trilogy and the two *Star Wars Story* films, the hero of the current trilogy is a woman, other franchise media like comic books have been utilized to include even more primary female characters, and thanks to Jonathan Kasdan, the writer of *Solo: A Star Wars Story* (2018), we have the first confirmation of a pansexual character. These changes are, on the surface, deeply important and long overdue. And as an anti-racist, feminist woman, I’ve found these shifts quite thrilling.

That said, the more time I spent watching the most recent films, and thinking about them in relation to all of the previous ones—and the more woman-led *Star Wars* comics I started to pick up—the more I felt that there was something very familiar about the ways characters were being handled. The narrative about the *Star Wars* universe that began to emerge from all ten of the films, and other media like comics, reminded me of another narrative I was once taught, the history of feminism in the US. Regardless of what the trolls say, *Star Wars* has always claimed to be about the fight for social justice, and when one focuses on the trajectory of the women in the *Star Wars* universe, it is tempting to think that the franchise has become more feminist in recent years. Indeed, as I shall show, the parallels between women’s roles in the franchise, and the development of the US women’s movement, are notable. Unfortunately, many of the similarities between the two narratives constitute what I argue are intersectional weaknesses in both.



Intersectionality is a term coined by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw in the late 1980s, although conceptually, discussions of the ways in which Black women's experiences are shaped by the simultaneous intersection of, at least, race and gender date back to abolition. About intersectionality, Crenshaw wrote, "Many of the experiences Black women face are not subsumed within the traditional boundaries of race or gender discrimination as these boundaries are currently understood, and that the intersection of racism and sexism factors into Black women's lives in ways that cannot be captured wholly by looking at the race or gender dimensions of those experiences separately" (Crenshaw 1993, 1244). As Crenshaw's theory has gained purchase across feminist circles, intersectionality has expanded beyond analysis of Black women's experiences only. Patrick Grzanka offers a broader definition saying that intersectionality centers on "The ways in which race, class, gender, sexuality, and other dimensions of identity and inequality shape the contours of social life and structures in the United States and around the world. 'Intersectionality [is] the study of how these dimensions of inequality co-construct one another'" (Grzanka 2014, xiii). In an academic context, Grzanka writes that "While intersectionality helps us to explore social and personal identities in complex and nuanced ways, intersectional analyses direct their critical attention to categories, structures, and systems that produce and support multiple dimensions of difference" (Grzanka 2014, xv). For my purposes then, this examination of the *Star Wars* films, and of the historical narrative of US feminism, will pay particular attention to the categories, structures and systems that produce and support multiple dimensions of difference and inequality. Following from Crenshaw, my primary focus will be on the treatment of Black women specifically, but given the relative paucity of Black female characters throughout the ten films, I will also occasionally discuss the treatment of non-Black women of color in both narratives.

While I do not believe that the most recent films fail entirely to represent the intersectional inequities experienced by women of color, they are what Bonnie Dill and Marla Kohlman would call intersectionally weak. Amongst the various ways theories of intersectionality have been adapted, Dill and Kohlman identify two types: strong intersectionality and weak intersectionality:

"'Strong intersectionality' may be found in theoretical and methodological rubrics that seek to analyze institutions and identities *in relation to one another*. That is, 'strong intersectionality' seeks to ascertain how phenomena are mutually constituted and interdependent, how we must understand one phenomenon in deference to understanding another. On the other hand, 'weak intersectionality' explores differences without any true analysis. That is to say, 'weak intersectionality' ignores the very mandate called for by Audre Lorde and seeks to explore no more than how we are different. 'Weak intersectionality' eschews the difficult dialogue(s) of how our differences have come to be—or how our differences might become axes of strength, fortification, and a renewed vision of how our world has been—and continues, instead, to be socially constructed by a theory and methodology that seeks only occasionally to question difference, without arriving at a deep and abiding understanding of how our differences are continuing to evolve" (Dill & Kohlman 2012, 169).

The *Star Wars* films, like the historical trajectory of US feminism, have increasingly recognized difference and the need for diverse representation, but overwhelmingly fail to acknowledge and critique how systems of inequality relate to one another and subjugate marginalized groups. The similarities in these narratives matter because while our dreams for the future are not limited by our past, they are at least informed by it, and an incomplete

understanding of our history seems to be impoverishing our ability to imagine more open horizons ahead.

One of the first similarities between the *Star Wars* films and the history of US feminism that merits attention is how Black men have fared better than Black women. In the original trilogy, there was the occasional Black actor in Rebellion crowd scenes, but more important was the devilishly charming Lando Calrissian, a scoundrel turned civil leader—a role that Donald Glover breathes new life into in *Solo: a Star Wars Story* (2018). Depending on how generous one is feeling, we should perhaps also recognize the importance of James Earl Jones' iconic voice acting in making Darth Vader the most powerful villain in the galaxy. In the 90s prequels, Samuel L Jackson plays Jedi master Mace Windu, Finn is a newly realized hero in Episodes VII and VIII, and from *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story* (2016), we know that Saw Gerrera is one of the “OG” rebels. In all of these examples, Black male characters are named, they speak, they have histories, they are integral to the storyline, and they are memorable. It isn't to say that these characters were treated with the same reverence as their white counterparts. *The Root* writer Jason Johnson collectively describes the Black men of *Star Wars* as “magical space wizards or gambling pimps and scoundrels” (2017). And, well, there was Jar Jar Binks. Relatively speaking, however, these men are made to be more memorable and central to *Star Wars* narratives than Black women.

Similarly, US feminism has historically had more time for Black men working in adjacent social justice movements than they have for the Black women agitating in their own movement. Moreover, while white supremacist histories have overwhelmingly villainized Black male leaders, the names of these men are far more recognizable than similarly remarkable Black women. According to Angela Davis, Frederick Douglass, the noted abolitionist, speaker, and author, was known as a “women's rights man,” and while white women frequently prohibited Black women from speaking in early women's movement meetings, Douglass was frequently invited by leaders like Elizabeth Cady Stanton to take the stage (1982, 30). In the civil rights era, activist and leader Malcolm X is quoted as having said, “the most disrespected person in America is the black woman. The most unprotected person in America is the black woman. The most neglected person in America is the black woman” (in Emba 2019). These words were uttered, journalist Christine Emba writes, at a time when Black women “felt sidelined in the fight for civil rights, [and] ignored during the feminist awakening” (2019). Black women were also speaking these truths in the 1960s, but it was Malcolm X who had the national platform and whose quote is still being circulated by journalists addressing intersectional oppression. Both of these men were threatened by white supremacist culture, both have been demonized in historical narratives, but they are, nevertheless, recognizable actors whose voices often resonate louder, even in relation to women's movements, than those of Black women themselves.

Black women, therefore, have been missing or marginalized in historical narratives of feminism and in *Star Wars* films. In the original trilogy, Black women are largely unrecognizable as Black women owing to the ways alienness is meant to stand in for racial difference. In *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story* (2016), actress Sharon Duncan-Brewster plays Senator Tynnra Pamlo but enjoys very little screen time and has very few lines. In *Solo: A Star Wars Story* (2018), most Black women are entertainment for Crimson Dawn (although there are two notable exceptions, a point to which I will return). In Episodes VII and VIII, there are Black women working for both the “good guys” and the “bad guys” although they are not named and are often allocated only a handful of words. There are many Black women in Canto Bite; however they are overwhelmingly reduced to arm candy. Lupita Nyong'o voices Maz Kanata but once again, her identity as a Black

woman is hidden behind a CGI character which Johnson describes as “a talking orange with swim goggles” (2016).

White women’s narratives of feminism have also relegated Black women to the margins, or rendered them invisible. As *New York Times* writer Brent Staples has suggested, the early women’s movement “tended toward a definition of ‘women’ that was implicitly limited to people of the gender who were white and middle class. Its most prominent advocates—Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Susan B. Anthony—drove home the notion by rendering black women nearly invisible in their hugely influential *History of Women Suffrage*” (2019). So, for example, “the official suffrage history reduces the poet and novelist Frances Ellen Watkins Harper to a bit player, even though she was central to the struggles for both African-American and women’s rights” (Staples 2019). Or, take for instance, the Netflix documentary *She’s Beautiful When She’s Angry* (2014) that examines the women’s movement in the 1960s. While the film includes discussion of feminists’ growing consciousness of the unique struggles of queer women, it never once mentions revolutionary transgender, Black activist Marsha P. Johnson as integral to that process. When Hillary Clinton won the Democratic nomination for the 2016 presidential race, countless articles circulated emphasizing the unprecedented nature of her win, most without recognizing that the first woman to *seek* the nomination was in fact Shirley Chisholm.

The really confounding thing about white women being the face of the revolution, both in the US and in a galaxy far, far away, is that Black women and women of color have had the most to lose and thus, have paid the highest price in seeking justice. In *Solo: A Star Wars Story* (2018), the character Enfys Nest, played by bi-racial Irish actress Erin Kellyman, explains at the conclusion of the film that she and her cloud-riders are fighting against the total eradication of their people, they are fighting back against exploitation and tyranny, and that the cost to all involved has been dear. We know that Enfys lost her mother, and I think we can reasonably infer that she will also lose her life since her character is nowhere to be seen in the future timeline of the Rebellion. Rose Tico, too, clearly articulates in *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* (2017) that her whole childhood was stolen from her because of imperial exploitation and extraction of resources. We see her lose her sister and very nearly her own life. In *Solo: A Star Wars Story* (2018), Val, played by Thandie Newton, is fighting to free herself from a life on the run but ultimately loses that fight when a heist job goes wrong. Even the fact that one of the faces upon which the camera lingers longest when the First Order destroys the Republic is a woman of color is significant.

It is not to say that white women in *Star Wars* haven’t had their own dose of problematic representations (Cocca 2016, 87–120). Nor is it to deny the losses suffered by white women characters: Leia lost her planet, Padmé seemingly dies of a broken heart, and both Jyn Erso and Amilyn Holdo give their lives for the Resistance. But the relative scarcity of Black women and other women of color means that their loss of life is cumulatively more devastating, and as I have just suggested, that it is the women of color who are subject to the most dire living conditions suggests that it is also they who would know best how justice should be sought. Instead, however, the faces of the Resistance are powerful white women with military and/or royal authority. Rey, while still being white, may prove an interesting exception, however I will return to that point shortly.

Black women in the history of the women’s movement have also had the most on the line and have paid the highest price, but have not been portrayed as the face of feminist resistance. Both Angela Davis and bell hooks re-examine the narrative of the women’s movement being born out of the abolition movement. Contrary to Stanton’s record of events—which suggest that women’s

agitation began after she and Lucretia Mott were not permitted to speak in an abolitionist meeting—Davis and hooks point out that Black women had been advocating for abolition and for their own interests as women for decades prior to Stanton’s awakening (1982; 1981). Why? Because unlike their middle-class white counterparts, who were fighting for freedom from the stifling environment of the home, Black women were fighting for their very humanity, for freedom from literal slavery, and for the ability to protect themselves from further institutional harm via political participation. It is little wonder then that Black women were ahead of the curve on social justice movements. Davis points out, for example, that while white women in Philadelphia were forming the Female Anti-Slavery Society in 1833, the *first* female anti-slavery society was actually formed by Black women in 1832 (1982, 34). In the 1960s, a major concern of the feminist movement was reproductive freedoms, and although it is certainly true that all types of women were dying from things like unsafe abortion procedures, Black women and Indigenous women were also faced with forced, non-consensual sterilization at alarming rates that are now being categorized as tantamount to genocide (Roberts 2014; Ralstin-Lewis 2005). Why then, in *She’s Beautiful When She’s Angry* (2014), is there a scene where a circle of women discuss the reproductive injustice of forced sterilization and every single one of them is white? Again, similar to the *Star Wars* films, there certainly were white women who paid dearly for their resistance to patriarchy, and who did so in alliance with Black women. Davis describes the 19th century Quaker white woman Prudence Crandall who insisted on integrating her school in order to educate Black children as well as white. She was met with town-wide boycotts, threats of violence and her school building was set ablaze (1984, 34–35). Nevertheless, the intersectional realities of Black women’s lives have made their fight for justice all the more pressing and necessary throughout US history.

When Black women have taken charge and fought back, they have overwhelmingly been characterized as unjustifiably angry, or violent, and in the context of the history of US feminism, Black women who refuse to follow the banner of white women, have been labeled divisive. They are rogues who are not recognizable in relation to the “good” resistance woman, but are instead treated as irrationally disruptive. Both Ida B. Wells and Harriet Tubman advocated for Black families to arm themselves with guns in order to protect themselves against ravenous white lynch-mobs and brutal law enforcement agencies seeking to re-enslave freed Black folks. Rather than consider what it might mean for Black families to face this kind of violence, and therefore understand these calls for gun-ownership in context, white feminists rejected women like Wells and impugned her womanhood (Schechter 2001). Today, despite the fact that Black people are killed by police in alarming rates (Edwards, Lee and Esposito, 2019), that Black women die in extraordinarily high numbers during childbirth (Hollander 2003), that Black and brown communities are overrepresented in the prison industrial complex (Alexander 2010), that poverty overwhelmingly wears a Black and Brown face in the US (Semega, Fontenot and Kollar, 2017), Black women like Alicia Garza, Patrisse Cullors, and Opal Tometi who started Black Lives Matter have been threatened, accused of being divisive, and labeled by government organizations as terrorists (Bandeled and Cullors, 2018).

In the *Star Wars* films, every single one of the main Black female characters, that is, women who speak, who are named, who have a backstory and who are integral to the plot, are framed as lawbreakers, rogues, disreputable and violent. Maz Kanata is a saloon owner who hosts all manner of patrons and who specializes in tasks like code breaking and negotiating trade disputes with blasters. Val is tantamount to a space pirate who is running from a criminal organization and who would rather sacrifice her life than see a heist go south. And Enfys Nest is frequently discussed as

a marauder and a killer. While we do get some context for Enfys' use of violence (and the surprise twist is that she is in fact the hero leading the resistance), the supposed criminality of the other women is never contextualized and we are lead to believe that it is an attribute of their characters.

Drawing attention to these parallels is not because I believe we should “cancel” *Star Wars*, nor do I believe we should throw away feminism. There are absolutely powerful elements of resistance in both *Star Wars* and in histories of feminism. For example, whether Rey winds up being given an illustrious heritage or not, the fact that she grew up in abject poverty and worked in exploitative, industrial conditions is important. Not unlike Black women abolitionists, poor white women Mill workers were overwhelmingly shut out of early narratives of the women's movement even in spite of the fact that it was mill working women who used their very meager wages to support social movements by, for instance, funding speaking tours for activists like Frederick Douglass (Davis 1982, 34). Thus, as a face of the Resistance, Rey is something of a subversive choice. Further, I think Qi'ra's abandonment of Enfys Nest, her Cloud-Riders, and Han and Chewie can absolutely be read as a sharp critique of white women who benefit from the revolutionary work of women of color and Indigenous folks, but who nevertheless align themselves with white supremacist, Imperialist patriarchy.

However, in arguing that both narratives are intersectionally weak, I believe that these kinds of stories, as they have been developed so far, are insufficient for real resistance. Simply expanding our narratives to include different types of people is only a cursory step that does very little to help us to truly grapple with the ways our social systems have operated to disproportionately marginalize, oppress, and punish those labeled as “different.” In this way, I think Maz Kanata is right, what we seek is not behind us: the *Star Wars* films and traditional historical narratives of US feminism are not the stories of resistance we need, and without being constructively critical of these narratives, they will limit what we can imagine going forward.

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