

# REALIZING RESISTANCE THROUGH SCHOLARSHIP AND BEYOND

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## An Introduction

**Samantha Langsdale**

Although *Star Wars: Episode IV—A New Hope* may have started out on shaky ground, its cinematic release in 1977 forever changed the landscape of American pop culture. As Douglas Brode has argued, “*Star Wars*, simply put, had turned out to be not merely the latest momentary blip on the entertainment screen but an essential element of how we define ourselves through the movies and related media” (2012, 7). Far from simply reflecting a particular film genre, *Star Wars* has become a cultural phenomenon that has impacted pop culture for over four decades. As such, we organized a scholarly conference titled “Realizing Resistance: An Interdisciplinary Conference on *Star Wars*, Episodes VII, VIII & IX,” held May 2–4, 2019 at the University of North Texas, in order to analyze these texts and their cultural impact. This inaugural issue of *Unbound: A Journal of Digital Scholarship* features the proceedings from our event and demonstrates the complexity, as well as the joy, inherent in *Star Wars* scholarship.

Throughout the original trilogy, the prequels, and most recently the sequels, the films have focused on the struggle between Imperial forces and rebellious fighters who seek to throw off the yoke of an authoritarian regime. In the opening crawl of *Episode VII—The Force Awakens* (2015), we are told that the Resistance, led by General Leia Organa, is fighting against the First Order so that peace and justice may be restored to the galaxy. Our conference sought to critically explore what it means to be “with the Resistance” by focusing on Episodes VII, VIII, and (to the extent possible) IX, as well as the various ways these films reflect, contribute to, or even fail to show “how we define ourselves through the movies and related media.” In other words, our conference brought together scholars from across disciplines to examine the three most recent *Star Wars* films as cultural texts, with an explicit focus on themes of resistance and justice, and



on how these films contribute to, reflect, or depart from broader contemporary cultural practices and social discourses.

Accepted papers analyzed, for example, the paradox inherent in certain fan criticisms of *Episode VII–The Last Jedi* (2017) as “social justice propaganda,” in light of the enduring theme of resistance and justice throughout the film franchise. Participants asked what it means for *Star Wars* slogans to be used on posters at contemporary political rallies, in what ways, and by whom. We posed critical questions about cultural appropriation and Orientalism in the most recent films and throughout the franchise. We also explored what limitations there may be in attempting to theorize about and practice resistance to hegemonic power in relation to a film franchise owned by one of the most powerful and successful corporations in our contemporary capitalist economy. Further, because the most recent films are part of the larger franchise, we welcomed papers that put Episodes VII, VIII & IX in dialogue with other *Star Wars* films and media related to the sequels including comics, animated series, fiction, merchandise, advertising, and games.

Our conference expanded beyond the traditional format of panels of paper presentations, however. In fact, we kicked off our weekend with a *Star Wars* pub quiz emceed by one of our conference participants, Shaun Treat. This kind of event allowed us to get to know each other as aca-fans and to extend the opportunity to think actively about the franchise to the local community. The quiz was held at Denton County Brewing Company and prizes were supplied by local store, More Fun Comics & Games. Quiz attendees included conference participants, Denton residents, and university students.



Figure 1: Conference organizers (l to r) Spencer Keralis, Samantha Langsdale, and John Martin.



Figure 2: Keynote Speaker Jeffrey Richey.

During the two days of paper presentations, we also included interactive workshops open to presenters, audience members, and Willis Library users looking for a study break. Claire Sewell, a presenter, organized our first workshop which taught participants how to make their own *Star Wars* coloring book pages (although most of us just ended up coloring the sample pages she brought us). The aims of this workshop were not simply to allow conference-goers a reprieve, but also to teach skills that could benefit classrooms, libraries, and other educational institutions when used outside the conference setting. Similarly, Spencer Keralis led the workshop on day two which taught attendees how to make hand-sewn zines, enabling them to create and disseminate unique “resistance literature” in accessible, economical ways.

We also rebelled against normative academic conference protocol by encouraging attendees to cosplay on Saturday, May 4<sup>th</sup>, otherwise known as “Star Wars Day” (McCormick 2016). Our motivations were rooted in the desire to cultivate yet another way for participants to express interest in a particular character, or in the culture resultant from the franchise more generally, and in the hopes that cosplay would further elicit a communal environment. Even our keynote speaker, Jeff Richey, delivered his paper decked out in the garb of his hero, Obi Wan Kenobi. These attempts at creating community are an important part of how we understand this project. So often, academic events in the United States are informed by hyper-competitive, neoliberal standards of production that put undue strain on individuals, that exacerbate feelings of isolation, and that make collective action seem untenable. Because our conference centered on themes of resistance to hegemony, and on socially realized justice, we prioritized praxis aimed at connection across disciplines, rank, and academic affiliation.



Figure 3: Promotional sticker from the Realizing Resistance conference.



Figure 4: Tweet from #RR19UNT highlighting the zine making workshop.

Another important aspect these beyond-scholarship events shared was the fun. Whether one finds it in Garrett Castleberry’s paper relating Star Wars to *Spaceballs* (1987), in the music playlist Spencer made for our website, in the cheeky titles for each panel (my favorite was Panel 5: “Yub Nub!”), or in the clandestine film screening/junk food feast we held Friday night, our conference was full of fun and joy. This was done at least in part to recognize what initially brought most of us to the franchise—our enjoyment of it. But it is also an integral part of seeking justice. Imperialism, colonialism, patriarchy, and neo-liberal capitalism are no laughing matter, but to rebel, to pave a new path is, as Stacy Alaimo suggests, “often whimsical or jocular, perhaps because improvisation is playful... If we cannot laugh, we will not desire this revolution” (2016, 2–3). It is our hope that you find this open-access issue of *Unbound* insightful and compelling, but most of all, that you enjoy exploring the galaxies far, far way with us. May the Force be with you... always.



Figure 5: Promotional sticker from the Realizing Resistance conference.

## Bibliography

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