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Barren Planets and the Ovum-like Death Star: Family, Fertility and Assisted Reproduction in *Star Wars* (1977-2019)¹

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Abstract

Having established the importance of diverse family formations in the saga, I will delve deeper to think about the related themes of fertility, life, and birth. It is essential here to consider Lucas' personal history with assisted reproductive technologies (ART) and how the franchise crosses five decades of intensive ART industry growth and regulation shifts. I will identify how cultural attitudes towards ART can be read through metaphors in the *Star Wars* films by tracing reproductive history from the 1970s. To do this, I will look at three main areas. First, I will look at planetary landscapes like the desert land of Tatooine, the swamps of Dagobah, and the tropical paradise of Scarif and consider how they have symbolic relevance when thinking about fertility. Second, I will examine the significance of orphans, clones, and donor-children who are birthed in 'barren' and 'sterile' environments. Finally, by examining the symbolic impact of the ovum-like Death Star, I will provide an analysis of how the Empire/First Order may represent tyrannical reproductive regulation against the reproductive freedom seemingly offered by the Republic/Resistance.

Introduction

It is essential to consider Lucas' personal history with assisted reproductive technologies (ART) and how the franchise crosses five decades of intensive ART industry growth and regulation shifts by looking at how cultural attitudes towards ART have shifted since the 1970s. To do this, I look at three main areas. First, I examine the significance of 'reproductive abnormalities' like as clones, who have distinct identities despite being genetically identical.² Second, by examining the symbolic impact of the ovum-like Death Star, I provide an analysis of how the First Galactic Empire may represent tyrannical reproductive regulation against the reproductive freedom seemingly offered by the Galactic

¹ This conference paper has been developed from my article 'A Moral Obligation Not to Conceive? Challenging the "Immorality" of Donor Conception and the Narrative of "Disadvantaged" Donor Offspring' which challenges Velleman's arguments against donor conception. This paper was written as part of my Cyborg Conception project funded by the Wellcome and ISSF. Please note that this paper is in draft form and offered as a supplemental to support my talk.

² In a longer paper, I would explore donor-conception in Velleman's work and in wider bioethical debate.

Republic.³ Finally, I look at planetary landscapes and consider how they have symbolic relevance when thinking about fertility. In the conclusion, I suggest that Velleman's reading of *Star Wars* articulates heteronormative reproductive privilege that not only positions new family formations as immoral but resulting children as fundamentally disadvantaged; I suggest that this stance coincides with how the Empire (and later, the First Order) attempt to limit biological diversity in the galaxy in order to establish a conformist rule.

Identity in the Saga

In short, the crux of Velleman's argument is that disadvantaged children are created when a child is born and raised without knowing their biological roots. For Velleman, the 'disadvantaged' child will struggle to identify 'what a person like this can make of himself' due to a lack of familiarity with their biological ancestry.⁴ Although Velleman does not term it as such, the 'advantaged child' – counterpart to the 'disadvantaged child' – is the one raised by a biological mother and a biological father. The *ideal* is that a child should be born to "healthy" biological parents who can offer a "stable" environment; consequently, Velleman argues against donor conception for same-sex couples and solo mothers by choice. The complexity of donor conception is beyond the parameters of this discussion, so that element I will shelve in this particular paper and instead focus on Velleman's reference to *Star Wars* and the saga's treatment of identity construction.

Velleman is preoccupied with the famous revelation of Luke Skywalker's parentage. Reflecting on *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980), Velleman asks:

When people deny the importance of biological ties, I wonder how they can read world literature with any comprehension [...] How can they even understand the colloquy between Darth Vader and Luke Skywalker? Surely, the revelation "I am your

³ The First Galactic Empire (known as the Empire) was succeeded by the First Order; the Galactic Republic has been replaced by the New Republic and is also affiliated with the rebellion group known as the Resistance and Alliance to Restore the Republic. As this paper is a conference paper, I will use the titles Empire and Republic whenever possible to avoid confusion. Frequently, the Empire is associated with the Sith and the Republic with the Jedi.

⁴ Velleman, 'Family History', p. 70.

father” should strike them as a bit of dramatic stupidity — a remark to be answered with “So what?”

The revelation is not ‘dramatic stupidity’, but I do think ‘so what’ is an appropriate response in context with the saga. Luke was born of Jedi Knight Anakin Skywalker and Senator Padme Amidala but is raised without biological parents after his mother dies and Anakin falls to the dark-side and is reborn as Darth Vader. Vader is the antithesis of everything Luke represents, championing an organisation driven by hatred and seeking the conquest of the universe. Throughout the saga, numerous characters distinguish between Anakin (birth father) and the Sith Lord, Vader.⁵ So, when Vader says to Luke ‘I am your father’ the reaction – in context – must ultimately be ‘so what?’ Luke and his twin sister Leia fought against the Empire before they knew Vader was their father and continued after the revelation: they ultimately say, ‘so what?’. The viewer must do the same throughout the franchise as Luke and Leia fight for the rebels against the Empire. Even though, as Andrew Lewis Conn reflects, the revelation of Luke’s parentage was shocking to the 1980s audience (a moment which ‘caused a collective frisson’⁶), we – like Luke – need to move on, say ‘so what’ and reflect on the complexity of Luke beyond mere chromosomes. Indeed, Conn recalls how his eight-year-old self ‘flinched and went cold’ at the line ‘I am your father’ but received the line contextually – as we all must do – and came to realise that it prepares us for ambiguity not just in the films but in life.⁷ Vader does not just tell Luke he is his father; the film tells the audience that identity is complicated and we are asked to what extent this information will inform who Luke is.⁸ The answer to this question comes in the following films as *Star Wars* champions the bond forged between a family that is chosen rather than born; the non-biological relationships between Luke, Han Solo, Obi-Wan Kenobi, Yoda, R2-D2, C-3PO, and Chewbacca are the most significant

⁵ Vader and the Emperor speak of Anakin and Vader as separate entities in *Empire Strikes Back*. In *Return of the Jedi*, Kenobi also makes the distinction: ‘Your father was seduced by the dark side of the Force. He ceased to be Anakin Skywalker and became Darth Vader’. In *Revenge of the Sith*, Yoda tells Kenobi that Anakin has been ‘consumed by Darth Vader.’ Vader says that the name Anakin ‘no longer has any meaning for me’ and Luke also speaks to Vader in the past tense about Anakin ‘you were once Anakin Skywalker, my father’ (*Return of the Jedi*).

⁶ Andrew Lewis Conn, ‘STAR WARS: always’, *Film Comment*, 33.3 (1997), pp. 2, 7-8

<<https://www.jstor.org/stable/43455275>> [Accessed 18 May 2021], p. 2.

⁷ Conn, 7.

⁸ We must remember that in *A New Hope*, Vader was not Luke’s father as the genetic connection was not established for Lucas until the sequel – Vader was initially not intended to be Luke’s father.

counters to the threat of the dark-side and provide Luke with the support and strength he needs to fight the Empire.

While there is no doubt that the bonds of friendship are all important in the saga⁹, I am not suggesting that biology is insignificant. After all, Anakin has within him a special disposition to the Force, and this biological trait is passed through the Skywalker line. Luke refers to Vader as 'Father' and fights for the rehabilitation of Anakin. However, the quest for identity in *Star Wars* is not the story of Luke discovering his roots but of Luke aiding Anakin's rebirth. The biological connection between Luke and Vader is described by Jedi Master Yoda in *Return of the Jedi* as a burden. It is Luke who teaches Vader the truth about himself; Anakin tells Luke while dying, 'You were right about me. Tell your sister... you were right'.⁷³ The revelation of parentage has more significance to Anakin's journey than Luke's. In fact, there is significance in Charles Taliaferro and Annika Beck's claim that Vader never actually takes on a fatherly role with Luke despite their genetic link: 'Luke seems to be acting more like the father than Vader, as Luke tries to turn him back to "the good side," as if the villain is a lost child.' While Luke may accept Vader's apology and forgive him for his murderous rampage, there is no positive relationship here. As Taliaferro and Beck note, Anakin/Vader as a father reflects a 'toxic caricature of love' and 'a painful portrait of how fatherhood can go wrong'.¹⁰ It is perplexing that Velleman references this relationship in an article that argues that both genetic parents should raise a child. I think the galaxy breathes a sigh of relief that Vader did not raise his twins.

So far, I have focused on Velleman's example – one isolated moment in the second film in the franchise – now, I want to explore how identity is explored in the other films.¹¹ The third trilogy of *Star Wars* films (*The Force Awakens* (2015), *The Last Jedi* (2017), and *The Rise of Skywalker* (2019)), sees the introduction of Ben Solo (Kylo Ren) who is the son of Luke's sister Leia and his friend Han Solo. Ben is born with the Skywalker predisposition to the Force

⁹ See: Greg Littman, 'The Friends of a Jedi: Friendship, Family, and Civic Duty in a Galaxy at War', in *The Ultimate Star Wars And Philosophy*, ed. By Jason T. Eberl and Kevin S. Decker (Oxford: Wiley, 2016), pp. 127-135.

¹⁰ Charles Taliaferro and Annika Beck, "Like My Father before Me": Loss and Redemption of Fatherhood in *Star Wars*', in *The Ultimate Star Wars And Philosophy*, ed. By Jason T. Eberl and Kevin S. Decker (Oxford: Wiley, 2016), pp. 117-126, p. 118.

¹¹ Velleman's first article was published before the sequel trilogy. My reference to the latter three films provides further evidence that identity construction is more complex than initially assumed.

which negatively impacts his childhood. The weight of identity expectations and biological lineage has a damaging impact on Ben who struggles to live up to his namesake 'Ben' Kenobi, his hero father 'Solo', his mother the political and military leader Leia, his uncle the renowned Luke Skywalker, and his grandfather the notorious Anakin Skywalker (Vader). Tormented by the pull to both the light and dark side of the Force and unable to navigate his complex biological heritage, Ben embraces the identity of Kylo Ren and turns against his family – even murdering his father.

Ben Solo is accused of simultaneously being too biologically informed and not genetically shaped enough. The Resistance views him as “too Vader” and the First Order as “too Skywalker”. In one scene alone from *The Last Jedi*, Snoke states that when he first encountered the boy he sensed ‘the potential of your bloodline; a new Vader’ then moments later mocks him by saying ‘you have too much of your father’s heart in you.’ It is of little wonder then that at the centre of Ben’s identity crisis is his claim that he has not had space to develop as a unique person:

Choice? I have no choice and never did. Even my name isn’t a choice. The dark side and light both claimed me for their own the moment I was born [...] Whether it’s Skywalker or Snoke, neither one sees me as a person. I’m just a... legacy. Just a set of expectations.¹²

Later, he refers to himself as a ‘shadow’, cementing the fact that he is dwarfed by lineage. The choice to name himself Kylo is significant. The new name is a combination of Skywalker and Solo – two names that he considers burdensome – but pruned to cathartically remove their authority over him. The resulting murderous rage to cement himself as Kylo Ren and Supreme Leader of the First Order reflects his desperation to establish his identity despite his lineage. Meanwhile, a new character called Rey is rising as a Jedi Master. During the saga, Rey discovers that her grandfather is Sheev Palpatine (Darth Sidious), the Sith Emperor. This revelation is jarring but does not sway her to darkness. She rejects what is presented as her ‘blood right’ to become Empress and instead fights for the Resistance. In a significant scene, Kylo Ren and Rey both try to possess Anakin Skywalker’s lightsabre – a weapon to which Kylo

¹² Charles Soule and Will Sliney, *Star Wars: The Rise of Kylo Ren*, Marvel, Issue 4. p.9.

believes he has a birthright as Anakin's grandson. Yet, the weapon favours Rey and is wielded by her. The Force does not choose the biological Skywalker line and this exchange symbolically highlights the fallacy of presenting 'blood' as superior to any other sort of connection.

In the final moments of *The Rise of Skywalker*, a stranger asks Rey for her name; she pauses because she has no last name – then she sees the spirits of Luke and Leia and announces that her name is Skywalker. Despite Palpatine blood running through her, she adopts the name and heritage that fits her blossoming identity. This is a huge transformation for a woman once described as 'nothing'.¹³ Rey's background is hidden from her; she is initially told that she is an orphan, abandoned by junktraders and later discovers she is a Palpatine. She is stuck between thinking she is 'nothing' and 'something'; but ultimately, she learns that her ancestral history is irrelevant as the saga prioritises choice and the independent construction of identity over determinative DNA and foundational genetic lineage. Rey does not succumb to the darkness even when Kylo Ren, knowing her ancestry, attempts to seduce her to dark side by claiming it is in her nature. By the end of *The Rise of Skywalker*, the only person who bears the Skywalker name is not a biological descendant. Biology was never important in the grand scheme of things and consequently when Palpatine tells Rey with gravitas, 'Long have I waited, for my grandchild to come home!' the revelation is met with dismissal because Rey is a Skywalker: it is something she is in her heart, not something she has in her veins.⁷⁵ Luke makes this point himself when he tells her that 'some things are stronger than blood'.¹⁴

The struggle between blood and essence is symbolically played out in the battle between Luke and Ren on Crait in *The Last Jedi*. As nephew and uncle fight, the salt flats are disturbed revealing scarlet underneath white; plumes of red particles fill the air, and the earth is stained crimson. Although no skin is cut, visually the pair are surrounded by blood. This whole exchange externalises the inner conflict between the blood kin. Yet, Luke is revealed to be just a vision – astral projecting through the Force. Ren's inability to detect that Luke is not physically present highlights the significance Ren places on the body and this obsession causes him to lose the fight. When Luke dies, his passing is felt through the Force by Leia and

¹³ *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope*, dir. by Rian Johnson, Disney, 2017.

¹⁴ *Star Wars Episode IX: The Rise of Skywalker*, dir. by J. J. Abrams, Disney, 2019.

Rey. No-one is present when he dies and his body dematerialises as he becomes one with the Force, further emphasizing the inconsequentiality of the body.

In fact, the Force itself is a good analogy for how we should perceive identity. The Force is cultural, ancestral, taught, adopted, and universal: described as ‘an energy field created by all living things’ that exists ubiquitously. The Force is described as an energy that ‘binds the galaxy together’¹⁵ but also as attuned at a cellular level: ‘Midi-chlorians are a microscopic lifeform that reside within all living cells and communicates with the Force.’¹⁶ While Yoda tells Luke in *Return of the Jedi* that ‘the Force runs strong in your family’, this same Force also runs strong in Yoda, Kenobi, the other Jedi Masters, and Sith Lords. Indeed, the Living Force that flows through all organic beings streams into the universe’s Cosmic Force which forms the pool of existence itself; therefore, all beings are connected and, genetics aside, every organic being from human to Wookiee is united as Force-born. The Force is also presented as beyond the limitations of biology and this is reinforced in *Rogue One* (2016) when Chirrut Îmwe is able to become one with the Force and engage in masterful combat even though he is a blind character. When Rey and Luke train together in *The Last Jedi*, Luke encourages Rey to close her eyes, breathe, and feel to experience the Force. As Elizabeth F. Cooke remarks ‘the Jedi way has much in common with a kind of mind-body dualism, whereby one must overcome his biological nature rather than become unified with it’. So while biology may have influence, the Force – which represents environmental and spiritual connection – is more significant. For Cooke, the Force represents unity in the saga and elevates community beyond the individual: ‘Each individual, as precious as he is, is part of a greater whole’.¹⁷

Orphans, Clones, and other Disadvantaged Peoples

Velleman uses *Star Wars* to highlight identity struggles faced by a ‘disadvantaged’ child raised without biological parents and without ancestral history. Velleman’s opposition to ART and donor conception is rooted in the belief that offspring will be encumbered. However, while Velleman criticises ART and uses *Star Wars* to highlight the essential role biology plays for

¹⁵ *A New Hope*.

¹⁶ *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace*, dir. by George Lucas 20th Century Fox, 1999.

¹⁷ Elizabeth F. Cooke, “‘Be Mindful of the Living Force’: Environmental Ethics in *Star Wars*”, *Star Wars And Philosophy*, ed. By Jason T. Eberl and Kevin S. Decker (Illinois: Open Court, 2005), pp. 80-92, p. 92.

identity construction, no connection is made between the saga and fertility even though the saga includes orphans, clones, and donor-conceived characters. Considering that Lucas has relied on ART to conceive a child with a gestational carrier, I think it is important to think about the links between *Star Wars* and ART context from the 1970s onwards.

Miles Booy traces the crises of the 1970s and considers how events like Vietnam, Nixon and Watergate, the illegal surveillance of citizens by the CIA, the energy crisis and other events informed the making of *Star Wars* and argues that the films respond to 'the changing cultural landscape'.¹⁸ I agree with Booy that the 1970s was a 'polarizing' time in which society imagined both impending peril and hope, and this polarity is also reflected in how the ART industry was being perceived following the birth of Louise Brown – the first human In vitro fertilisation (IVF) baby in 1978. Susan Golombok notes that this decade was a pivotal time in western culture for a shift in how families were perceived: 'changes to the structure of the family have been taking place since the 1970s.'¹⁹ Partly, as Golombok explains, this is because the 70s saw changing attitudes towards people identifying as LGBT and the growing gay rights and women's liberation movements.²⁰ The birth of Brown was followed by IVF success in America in 1981 (two years before *Return of the Jedi*). The growth of the industry, as evidenced by the increase in fertility clinics in the 80s and 90s, coincided with a torrent of breakthroughs in ART (for example greater success with frozen gametes, frozen IVF transfers, and donor gamete conception) and cultural shifts that welcome treatment for same-sex couples, those in co-parenting arrangements, solo people, and unmarried couples. While gamete regulations in the UK did not come in until 1991, Luke's paternity revelation coincided with public interest in the new and sudden openness of the baby-making industry. By the end of the 1990s, Vader was dead, Anakin Skywalker was born to a solo mother, and many countries had prohibited completely anonymous gamete donations. The problem of anonymity and the globally heated debate on this issue coincided with the secretive birth of the Skywalker twins who were then raised without knowledge of their parentage. This birth occurred in 2005, the same year the UK introduced compulsory identity release for all gamete donors and banned completely anonymous donations. Just a couple of years after Padme's

¹⁸ Miles Booy, *Interpreting Star Wars: Reading a Modern Film Franchise* (New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2021), p.22.

¹⁹ Susan Golombok, *Modern Families: Parents and Children in New Family Forms* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), p. 2.

²⁰ Golombok, p. 3.

multiple pregnancy and the introduction of the clones to the saga, the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority (HFEA) introduced the One at a Time campaign to limit multiple pregnancies through fertility treatment having recognised a spike in multiple births in the UK in the 90s and 2000s. The tremulous time for ART development after 1970 spanned the three *Star Wars* trilogies and ran in parallel to the saga's complex treatments of solo parenting, anonymous parentage, donor conception, bioengineering, nuanced attention to kinship, and welcoming of diverse family formations.

One of the major symbols that connects *Star Wars* to ART is the presence of the clone army introduced in *Attack of the Clones* (2002).²¹ In the film, Obi Wan Kenobi discovers the development of an army of clones created from the genetic template of the bounty hunter Jango Fett.²² The clone army are engineered with specific limitations: 'they are totally obedient taking any order without question'.²³ On the surface, the presence of the clone trope in the saga may suggest criticism and concern over ART. However, clones do not represent an argument against reproductive technologies and donor conception wholesale but represent the urgent need for industry regulation. If anything, Jango's donor storyline warns against unregulated practices and reflects the 'Wild West' nature of American ART in the 20th Century in which one donor could sire hundreds of children.

The cloning storyline also undermines Velleman's argument that biology is the seat of identity. Jango receives a clone son he names Boba in exchange for his donation; while Boba is genetically identical to Jango he is such an individualised character that he has become a fan favourite, has appeared in numerous spin-offs, and will soon star in his own Disney+ show *The Book of Boba Fett* (2021). Furthermore, *Clone Wars* (2008-2020), the TV series, makes repeated reference to differences in personality, behaviour, and psychology across the clone soldiers. Yoda even makes a point about how each clone is an individual:

²¹ The television series *The Clone Wars* (2008-2020) and *The Bad Batch* (2021-) provide additional detail on the clones but are beyond the parameters of this discussion. At the time of writing only two episodes of *The Bad Batch* has been released.

²² *The Clone Wars* includes numerous connections to the ART industry. For example, when Jango donates his genetic template he does so in exchange for a cloned son – this contractual agreement mirrors common practice in which ART packages are reduced if gametes are donated. In addition, in *Attack of the Clones* a birds-eye shot of the clone army sectioned into square military units resembles rows of test tubes containing gametes divided into trays for freezing. Also, the significance of multiple offspring from Jango's donation mirrors the increased probability of multiples following medicated intrauterine insemination (IUI) and multiple embryo transfer through IVF.

²³ *Star Wars Episode II: Attack of the Clones*, dir. George Lucas, 20th Century Fox, 2002.

Clone: There's not much to look at here Sir, we all share the same face.

Yoda: Deceive you, eyes can. In the Force, very different each one of you are.

Yoda proceeds to name each clone personally and comments on an aspect of their individuality. Again, the Force which flows through all organic forms is attributed to be the seat of identity – not biology: as Yoda says, 'Clones you may be but the Force resides in all lifeforms.'²⁴ The individuality of the clones is underscored by a principle character Rex who despite being a clone with an inhibitor chip shows distinctive personality. Declan Cassidy notes that the focus on clone individuality in the animated series sees not only clones demonstrating personality and character under the lead of the Grand Army of the Republic but the 'democratization of *Star Wars*'.²⁵ This is a more careful reading than the 'knee jerk' reaction that bioengineering is uniformly evil, oppressive, and a driver of uniformity.

The Ovum-like Death Star

Considering the context of ART development from the 1970s onwards, we can read additional fertility metaphors into the saga. The Death Star is a good example of this.

The Death Star is an armed orbital battle station with the capacity to destroy planets. Physically, it is a grey orb with one embedded parabolic dish which looks like a circular depression. There are numerous readings of the Death Star. Anne Lancashire sees the orb-shaped weapon as a skull 'representing death and the fear of death.'²⁶ Darren Jorgensen considers the Death Star juxtaposed to nature: 'The artificial planet is victorious over the natural one, the juxtaposition of metal and life leaving only the shadow of the Death Star's silvery sheen in space'.²⁷ Toby Neilson explores the superweapon's connection to anxieties about the Anthropocene and wider imageries of environmental disaster. Mary Henderson reads the weapon as a metaphor for consumption as the heroes are 'literally swallowed up

²⁴ 'Ambush', *Star Wars: The Clone Wars*, Warner Bros, 3 October 2008.

²⁵ Declan Cassidy, 'Clones and Hybridity', in *Postcolonial Star Wars: Essays on Empire and Rebellion in a Galaxy Far, Far Away*, ed. By Matthew Schultz (Cambridge: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2020), pp. 89-94, p. 89, 94.

²⁶ Anne Lancashire, "The Phantom Menace": Repetition, Variation, Integration, *Film Criticism*, 24.3 (Spring, 2000), pp. 23-44 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/44019059>> [Accessed 07 May 2021], p. 25.

²⁷ Darren Jorgensen, "Death Star, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Globalization", *symplokē*, 15. 1/2, (2007), pp. 206-217 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/40550769>> [Accessed 14 April 2021], p. 208.

into its very bowels'.²⁸ While it is possible, as Nick Jamilla suggests, to consider the Death Star as representing 'anti-technology',²⁹ this overlooks how technology, like the Force, is often presented in a binary way as either good or bad.³⁰ Others describe the Death Star in terms of sexual imagery; Andrew Gordon, for example, reads the destruction of the Death Star as 'an orgasmic explosion of fireworks' after the rebels drop 'proton torpedoes down a symbolically suggestive narrow chute'.³¹ Likewise, Peter Lev suggests that 'the final attack on the Death Star, the one-man fighters penetrating the sphere could certainly be a representation of human reproduction.'³² I, however, read the Death Star as symbolic of fertility in context with the exponential growth of the fertility industry around that time.

The Death Star is ovum-shaped with the 'dent' on its surface optically resembling a nucleus. It appears as a singular unit in the darkness of space like a single egg from ovulation. The Death Star's successor, the First Order's Starkiller Base (introduced in 2015), is also a solo orb but with a slit across the surface making it look more like a zygote at the 2-cell stage. This 'upgrade' from egg to zygote makes sense as the First Order is an evolved version of the Empire and a step closer to galactic rule. But rather than symbolise life, the ovum-like Death Star and the zygote-like Starkiller base mark an inversion of life as they are genocidal weapons. In this respect, these weapons represent the Empire's/First Order's threat to birth a murderous "new order"; the Rebellion must seek to destroy them before their endeavours reach fruition.

There are obvious aesthetic connections between conception imagery and how *Star Wars* cinematographically depicts these weapons under attack; reoccurring depictions of missiles and spacecrafts (like the iconic X-wings and Y-wings) striking the orbs are reminiscent of sperm assaulting ovum. The Resistance as symbolic spermatozoa may make some sense if we interpret the assault as a way to infiltrate and impregnate with the objective to regain control over the Galaxy through occupation. Indeed, both orbs are penetrated by the

²⁸ Mary Henderson, *Star Wars: The Magic of the Myth* (New York: Bantam Books, 1997), p. 53.

²⁹ Nick Jamilla, 'Defining the Jedi Order Star Wars' Narrative and the Real World', in *Sex, Politics, and Religion in Star Wars: An Anthology*, ed. by Douglas Brode, and Leah Deyneka, (Plymouth: Scarecrow Press, 2012), pp. 127-140, p. 136.

³⁰ Not only can technology be befriended in *Star Wars* (R2D2, C3PO, BB8, L3-37, etc.), it is often used in conjunction with the Force. For example, Anakin's affinity with the Force enables him to better control his podracer and both Jedi and Sith wield lightsabres when using the Force in battle.

³¹ Gordon, Andrew, "'Star Wars': A Myth for Our Time", *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 6.4 (Fall 1978), pp. 314-326 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/43795691>> [Accessed 04 April 2021], p. 314, 324

³² Peter Lev, 'Whose Future? "Star Wars, Alien", and "Blade Runner"', *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 26.1 (1998), pp. 30-37 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/43796821>> [Accessed 19 May 2021], p.35.

Resistance with key figures (Luke and Han) attempting to assimilate the dark leaders (Vader and Ren respectively) into the light. However, another reading could imagine the Resistance as acting like the Galaxy's natural killer cells (NK cells). NK cells are white blood cells which defend the host and fight infection by killing infected cells. In some cases of recurrent miscarriage, clinicians suggest that an abnormal level of NK cells in the uterus (uNK) may negatively affect how the uterus receives sperm or embryo leading to miscarriage.³³ Although immunology is not a new branch of medical science, our understanding of NK cells is relatively new with their discovery in the 1970s. It was in 1975, just two years before the release of the first *Star Wars* film, that the term 'natural killer cell' was coined. The Resistance in the form of swarm-like 'wing' ships (X and Y) attack the orb-like weapons en-masse and destroy them; this attack returns that sector of space to a void like an empty uterus. Characters aside, if we boil the saga down to its bare bones, the series is essentially about one political faction attempting to birth a new rule while an opposing faction works to abort these efforts. Basically, *Star Wars* presents the struggle to conceive and birth an ideal.

Barren Landscapes

The Death Star and Star Killer base are designed to destroy planets and planetary systems; in doing so the Empire/First Order hope to undermine the Resistance, reduce uncontrolled populations, and increase their own political and military power. Consequently, the planets encountered in the saga – whether barren deserts or lush fertile jungles – are sites in which the birth/death struggle play out. It is important now to look at how planets in series can act as symbolism for identity and fertility issues.

I will start with the Skywalker home planet, Tatooine. Like most planetary landscapes in the saga, Tatooine is a vast desert with small, isolated communities. The infertile and desolate landscape of the desert can be read as symbolic of barrenness; as Tatooine is the

³³ See: HFEA, 'Reproductive Immunology Update', *Scientific and Clinical Advances Advisory Committee*, 04 February 2015 <https://www.hfea.gov.uk/media/1823/reproductive_immunology.pdf> [Accessed 07 June 2021].

birthplace of the Skywalker line it also subliminally links the Resistance to barrenness.³⁴ Under the rule of an Empire in which life is not cherished and settlements are struggling – not to mention the notable lack of children – the desert reflects sterility. Those who are born under the rule of the Empire represent the chokehold the Sith have on populations and under this tyrannical regulation only ‘disadvantaged’ offspring are sired and born: clones, orphans (Luke and Leia – albeit symbolically – and Rey), the abducted Stormtrooper children, and the deeply troubled Ben Solo. In the Star Wars novel *Darth Plagueis* (2012) the inhabitants of Tatooine are described as a subclass: ‘vast deserts now support a population of ne’er-do-wells, scoundrels, and hapless spacers of all species. I’ve heard it said that nothing pans out on Tatooine, and that beings who reside there age prematurely’.³⁵ The desert planets, therefore, illustrate that for the Empire to grow, the ability of the free galaxy to expand its population beyond regulation must be terminated. Under this rule, those who survive are marginalised and doomed.

In addition, Tatooine, like many desert settings, can be read as representing the wasteland of identity. Walid Hamarneh, writing on the symbolic significance of the desert remarks ‘For those who live far away from it, the desert generally represents scarcity, aridity, dryness, barrenness in contradistinction to the abundance and plenitude associated with the rural and the urban.’ For Hamarneh, the desert landscape of Tatooine in *Star Wars* is integral to establishing character:

Those who live in the vicinity of the desert share some of these attitudes and conceptions of the desert, yet due to their proximity they tend to emphasize its aridity

³⁴ The struggle within the Skywalker family for cohesion acts juxtaposes struggle to establish an identity for the galaxy during a polarizing war. Principle planets are habitable, political, or labouring and have stark identities rendering them disposable or usable in the galactic war and thus are often affiliated with either Empire or Rebellion. The Resistance has affiliations with the mining planet Crait, the inhospitable planet Hoth, the shipbuilding planet Mon Cala, the ecumenopolis Hosnian Prime, the Jedi planet Ahch-To, etc.; the Empire is linked to Kamino (used for the construction of clone armies), the Sith worlds of Exegol, Korriban, and Zist, the agriworld of Medriaas, etc. Others like the city planet Coruscant and prison planet Wobani have experienced identity crises as affiliations have changed. Simon Beecroft describes the galaxy as a ‘loose conglomeration of competing worlds.’ This description is useful when thinking about issues of identity and fertility in the Saga. Simon Beecroft, *Inside the Worlds of Star Wars Attack of the Clones* (London: Lucas Books, 2003), p. 3.

³⁵ James Luceno, *Star Wars: Darth Plagueis* (New York: Ballantine Books, 2012), ebook [n.p.]

and its threat to human existence. The desert usually becomes a place associated with death, actually with slow and tortuous dying.³⁶

I agree with this reading and also agree that the characters of Anakin and Luke share some of the desert's characterisations. Anakin, for example, warns in *The Phantom Menace* of sandstorms that attack quickly and pose great danger; the relentless storms which obscure vision represent several aspects of Anakin's character which are underpinned by his inability to see and think clearly: the confusion around his unknown parentage, his bloodlust rages, and his inevitable seduction by the darkside. Through the series, Anakin seems to be lost in clouds of confusion, chaos, and danger. It is telling that the name Skywalker literally means someone who treads the air and imagines someone who is best suited to flight and adventures off planet; yet, in their early years Luke, Anakin and Rey are planet bound and rooted in a desert landscape beyond the care of the Republic. It is only when they leave the planet that they evolve as people.

Fertile threats

While many planets are desert-like (Tatooine, Jakku, Jedha, Crait), there is some topographical diversity.³⁷ The planets that are lush and thriving are often targets for the orb-like superweapons; this, I suggest, is because these planets represent fertility and life for the Resistance.³⁸ It is the objective of the Empire to snuff out these fertile springs. This is why the Death Star is specifically described as a 'planet killer'.³⁹ Alderaan, the home planet of Leia Organa, is visually reminiscent of Earth and is described as 'peaceful' and defenceless. When Leia becomes rebel leader, Alderaan (retrospectively) signifies the birthplace of the

³⁶ Hamarneh, Walid, 'Welcome to the Desert of Not-Thinking', *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature / Revue Canadienne de Littérature Comparée* 41, no. 1 (2014): 86-98. doi:10.1353/crc.2014.0007 [Accessed 07 June 2021].

³⁷ The short film *Star Wars Biomes* (2021) offers a virtual tour of planetary landscapes in the saga, including Tatooine. The short film highlights the environment, offering very little in way of intelligent life except for a couple of droids and a skirmish on Crait. The lack of intelligent life in *Star Wars Biomes* reflects the dominance of landmass and the dwindling galactic populations. Depictions both of fossils on Tatooine and the ongoing conflict on Crait accentuates the devastation war has brought to the galaxy and foreshadows further loss.

³⁸ It is worth noting that there are numerous descriptions of land desecration. In prequel novel, *Darth Plagueis*, Plagueis and Sidious are described obliterating the life on Bouyant and the more they killed, the stronger the dark side became.

³⁹ *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story*, dir. by Gareth Edwards, Disney, 2016.

Resistance. As Alderaan is the Death Star's first target, the audience is shown that fertile planets standing for hope and peace are perceived as threats under the Empire and will be eradicated.

The tropical paradise of Scarif is another victim of the Death Star. With filming of relevant scenes carried out in the Maldives, Scarif is rich with lush and green vegetation and turquoise waters. The despoilment of Scarif further represents the Empire as a monument of decreation and a step towards rendering the galaxy barren. Takodana (filmed in the Lake District) is similar. When Rey first encounters the lush green forest planet of Takodana she exclaims 'I didn't know there was this much green in the whole galaxy'; this planet is also attacked, and a lot of screen time is dedicated to showing the devastation of the land. The desecration of fertile planets reflects how barrenness tears through the galaxy under the power of the Empire/First Order.

With planetary destruction, we are also witnessing the eradication of cultures and political systems that are not aligned with the vision of the Empire. As Daniel Malloy notes, Alderaan was 'a people, a culture, a government, a history, a collection of traditions and customs, an ecosystem, and many other things besides.'⁴⁰ Planetary attacks serve to do more than brutalise; they smother diverse societies and cultures because they are viewed as worthless and nonconformist. In the novel *Darth Plagueis*, we are told that the ambition of the Sith is to enact genocide to ensure a superior form of evolution; Plagueis himself says:

If millions died in the process, so be it. The lives of most beings are of small consequence. The Jedi have failed to understand this. They are so busy saving lives and striving to keep the powers of the Force in balance that they have lost sight of the fact that sentient life is meant to evolve, not simply languish in contented stasis.⁴¹

The apparent stagnation of the Jedi as identified by Plagueis is poignantly represented through the planet of Dagoba where Jedi Master Yoda is in exile. This planet is characterised by dank, swampy land described as a 'slimy mudhole'⁴². Dagoba is symbolic of stagnation

⁴⁰ Daniel Malloy, 'Light Side, Dark Side, and Switching Sides: Loyalty and Betrayal in Star Wars', in *The Ultimate Star Wars And Philosophy*, ed. By Jason T. Eberl and Kevin S. Decker (Oxford: Wiley, 2016), pp. 136-147, p. 138.

⁴¹ *Star Wars: Darth Plagueis* (London: Random House, 2011), p. 159. This book is no longer considered canon.

⁴² *Star Wars Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back*, dir. by Irvin Kershner, 20th Century Fox, 1980.

under the oppressive force of the Empire. Some readings of Dagoba suggest the planet is ‘an oasis, a place to recover’ and where ‘fundamental questions are answered.’⁴³ Yet, Dagoba, overwhelmed with water, can further stand for how the Jedi (as represented by the slowly dying Yoda on the marsh-like planet) have been overwhelmed by the Sith and now drown in the darkness of its rule. While vegetation grows, the planet is not suited for human/oid life, and it is symbolic that it is on Dagoba that Yoda dies. If we place Dagoba within the extended metaphor of fertility, Dagoba is symbolic of impotence: it is fertile but inhospitable. Dagoba is where those who wish to act are relegated to and it is where life is suggested but not sustained. The last scene on Dagoba sees the ghost of Kenobi comfort Luke after Yoda’s death – when Luke leaves the planet it is inhabited only by ghosts.

In terms of what this suggests about identity, we should reflect upon the fact that the Dagoba swamp is characterised by ancient trees, the roots of which stretch out of the water, prong-like, and stand taller than Luke; these roots are symbolic of the deep connection Luke has with the Jedi Masters and with the Force. Yet, when Luke meets Vader their encounters are in the antiseptic environment of a ship which is sleek, cold, and characterised by metal surfaces; this environment is symbolic of the sterile relationship between Luke and his biological father. Ultimately, Luke has deeper bonds with his Jedi Masters than he does with a man with whom he shares chromosomes. When Luke discovers Vader is his biological father, Yoda’s words on Dagoba are of renewed importance: ‘You must unlearn what you have learned.’⁴⁴ Luke must surrender the dreams and ideals he had of his father and unlearn his assumption that the man would be so integral to his ideas of self. It is also on Dagoba that Luke has a vision of killing Vader only to see his own face inside the iconic mask; but when Luke finally removes Vader’s helmet in *Return of the Jedi* he sees the grotesque form of Anakin instead. In contrast to *The Empire Strikes Back*, Luke does not see himself in his father and now he is able to say goodbye and move forward.

Procreative rights

⁴³ Todd H. Sammons, ‘“Return of the Jedi”: Epic Graffiti’, *Science Fiction Studies*, 1987, 14.3 <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/4239843>> [Accessed 04 June 2021], pp. 355-371, p. 355.

⁴⁴ *The Empire Strikes Back*.

The murderous ambitions of the Empire/First Order/Sith juxtapose the diminished potential for planetary environments to host life. If we consider how the Empire attempts to engineer all life in the galaxy by reducing the unregulated Galactic population and manufacturing a new subservient people, then we can also think about how the ART industry may be viewed through this lens. It can be argued that the Sith's dictatorship represents unethical aspects of the ART industry.

The Empire's creation of clones and the monstrous visages of their principal characters (Darth Vader, the Emperor, General Grievous, Darth Maul, Supreme Leader Snoke) has obvious parallels to societal concern over the use of ART technologies to create clones, hybrids, chimeras, and genetically engineered super-people. Concern over irresponsible genetic engineering was a heated topic in the mass media in the 1990s following the groundbreaking news that The Roslin Institute had successfully cloned a sheep. A year after Dolly, in 1997, Stuart Newman, a member of the Council for Responsible Genetics, alongside biotechnology critic Jeremy Rifkin, attempted to patent the speculative creation of an animal/human hybrid known as Humouse™. Their ambition was not to create the hybrid but to prevent others from doing so. They sought to prevent others from creating "monsters". We can easily see here some context that would have informed the 2002 film *Attack of the Clones*.

Overall, then, we can view the Empire as representing the unease society may have towards the unethical extreme of biotechnologies. How the planet of Kamino is utilised underscores the connection between the Empire and biotechnology. Kamino is listed as an inhospitable world and yet is the manufacturing hub of cloning in the galaxy. Here, we see an example of an environment that is ordinarily unable to support life but with the assistance of technology is not only able to produce life in an infertile space but does so unethically. The product of this engineering is a militarised force that spreads across the galaxy like a plague eradicating life in its wake. All that said, I must be careful not to suggest that the saga starkly represents unrest towards assisted reproduction; the Empire represents the extreme of bioengineering without regulation. In fact, the chokehold the Empire has over the population of the galaxy also represents the problems that comes with extreme and prejudiced ART industry regulation.

While regulation is important⁴⁵, the extreme of the Empire rule is what happens when regulation is not in the interests of people and does not allow for the formation of diverse family structures. To explain this better we need to return to Tatooine once more. Scenes for Tatooine were shot in Tunisia. In Tunisia, fertility treatment for solo mothers and same sex couples is illegal. In the 1970s, Tunisia did not have a licensing body and had only a few clinics in comparison to the hundreds in America. However, even now in 2021, ART is restricted to married couples due to religious and cultural beliefs. The freedom the Republic offers does not exist on Tatooine which is described as beyond its control ('The Republic doesn't exist out here'⁴⁶).⁴⁷ Instead, the tyrannical rule of the Empire is felt and under this control communities are marginalised, families broken apart, and populations completely wiped out. While the Empire reflects societal fears of technology and biotech out of control and wielded dangerously, the Empire simultaneously symbolises the oppression of prejudiced regulation that prevents the construction of families. When we think about the difference between the characters that populate the Resistance/Republic and the Empire, we might think family verses comrade. The well-known members of the Resistance – Luke, Han, Leia, Rey – form a family; whereas the connections between the characters linked to the Empire have no lasting bonds. This is because the Empire welcomes strategy and conquest whereas the Resistance celebrates family and friendship and seeks Galactic freedom.

If the Death Star (and Starkiller Base) can be read as representative of the dark-side of ART then its destruction of thriving worlds may also represent the potential destructive power of genetic capitalism and the threat it poses to our world and civilisation. However, under the Republic there is hope. It was during the Republic that Anakin was born to a solo mother and was prophesied to be the Chosen One. In the destruction of fertile planets we see this battle between the freedom of the Republic and the tyranny of the Empire play out. The Death Star becomes the ultimate metaphor for the Empire; it is not the bringer of death but – in its ovum

⁴⁵ I agree with the HFEA that gamete donation should be regulated to ensure donor conceived offspring are able to trace their biological history, are aware of donor siblings, and know their donor's medical history. To be clear, I am not against regulation; I am opposed to regulation that restricts ART from the LGBTQ+ community and solo parents.

⁴⁶ *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace*, dir. by George Lucas 20th Century Fox, 1999.

⁴⁷ As Kevin S. Decker discusses, politics in the Saga is complex. I am speaking broadly about the Republic representing freedom and democracy here. However, for a deeper appreciation of the political drivers in the Saga see: Kevin S. Decker, 'By Any Means Necessary: Tyranny Democracy Republic, and Empire', in *Star Wars And Philosophy*, ed. by Jason T. Eberl and Kevin S. Decker (Illinois: Open Court, 2005).

shape – it represents a new type of life under the power of the Sith: one of struggle, restriction, and the complete loss of freedom.

Conclusion

Velleman claims that ‘people unacquainted with their origins have been seen throughout history as dramatically, even tragically, disadvantaged’ and uses a handful of outdated literary and historical examples to support his argument.⁴⁸ At no point does Velleman consult contemporary writings on the lived experience of donor-conceived families. He also conflates problems with lack of regulation in America with the global industry and criticises ART without nuance. It is important not to disadvantage children by presenting donor-conceived people as having a shattered identity through being born to “inadequate” families when, in fact, studies have shown children thrive within these new family formations.⁴⁹ By reflecting on his heteronormative upbringing within the traditional nuclear family structure, Velleman positions his life-experience as idealistic and a template of reproductive advantage. However, dictating an ideal family model and suggesting that some people have a moral obligation not to conceive is reminiscent of the dictatorial way the Empire attempts to further its political

⁴⁸ David J. Velleman, ‘Persons in Prospect II’, in *Beyond Price: Essays on Life and Death* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2015), loc.2185.

⁴⁹ Recent studies have found that donor-conceived offspring who are created and raised following industry guidance are often healthy and well adjusted. See testimonies from donor-conceived offspring such as ‘Carly’s Story’ and ‘Kate – Donor Conceived Adult’. Also, Susan Golombok’s (*et al*) paper published in *Developmental Psychology* (2017) references Velleman’s work and notes that ‘Despite the concern that children born through reproductive donation would be at risk for psychological difficulties at adolescence’, the reality is that donor-conceived teenagers are no different to ‘natural conception families.’ Golombok concludes that ‘Children born through reproductive donation are, by necessity, planned and there is evidence to show that planned pregnancies are associated with more positive psychological outcomes for mothers and children’ (p. 1973-4). As Roth says in her analysis of Velleman’s argument against Queer families: ‘How can an antidonor conception position of Velleman’s sort be plausible if expert consensus on the empirical evidence holds that many of the very children he presumes to be disadvantaged and raised in inferior families do just as well (or better) than those raised in traditional heterosexual families?’ (42).

‘Carly’s Story - daughter in a solo mum family’, *DCN*, 2020 <<https://www.dcnetwork.org/story/carlys-story-daughter-solo-mum-family>> [Accessed 02 March 2021].

‘Kate - Donor Conceived Adult’, *DCN*, 2018 <<https://www.dcnetwork.org/story/kate-donor-conceived-adult>> [Accessed 02 March 2021].

Susan Golombok, *et al*, ‘A Longitudinal Study of Families Formed Through Reproductive Donation: Parent-Adolescent Relationships and Adolescent Adjustment at Age 14’, *Developmental Psychology*, 53.10, 2017 <<https://psycnet.apa.org/fulltext/2017-32863-001.pdf>> [Accessed 12 January 2021].

Amanda Roth, ‘What Does Queer Family Equality Have To Do With Reproductive Ethics?’, *International Journal of Feminist Approaches to Bioethics*, 9.1 (2016), pp. 27-67. <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.2307/90011857>> [Accessed 02 March 2021].

ideals to the detriment of diversity in the *Star Wars* galaxy. As Obi-Wan tells us, 'Only a Sith deals in absolutes.'⁵⁰

Change welcomes new family formations and new ways of thinking about identity. As Shmi Skywalker, solo mother to Anakin Skywalker, says, 'You can't stop the change, any more than you can stop the suns from setting.' Shmi's words foreshadow the tragedy of the saga for Anakin's refusal to embrace change fuels Vader's ambition to try and control the destiny of every living being in the universe. The link between not embracing change and wanting to control others is something on which Velleman may wish to reflect. As I finish this paper, I wonder how anyone can comprehend the saga of *Star Wars* without appreciating the power and importance of fellowship, choice, and change.

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