

**On Darth Vader and the Homunculus Theory of the Mind** by Frank Brown Cloud

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I have never lived in a world in which Darth Vader was not known to be secretly white. The day before I was born *Return of the Jedi* had its theatrical release; my white sci-fi-watching parents (my father had stolen a *New Hope* movie poster, which would hang in my future bedroom), expecting me, did not attend the opening. But others knew. In that film, the helmet came off, the man was seen.

Previously there'd been six years during which people could've been fooled. Not just soda guzzlers in the audience: in the beginning, screenwriters, actors, and producers all could've been fooled too. In the beginning, there was no plan.

And Vader had stepped on strong. Gleaming black from head to toe. James Earl Jones killing the voice. America's favorite rape myth trotted out right away: white-clad bride-like Carrie Fisher shrinking from but unable to escape his approaching pseudophallic hypodermic torture device.

Not that I appreciated this when I was growing up. Living in a nearly all-white town in central Indiana, a sea of sameness so bland we thought the Japanese kid at our high school might be black (in our defense, Yoshi *did* listen to hip-hop), I didn't view cinema through a racial lens. Why would I? Wasn't till college when I finally learned that sometimes the robo-suited villain commanding the Death Star isn't *just* a robo-suited villain commanding the Death Star.

Seemed so clear once we discussed it in class. These days anybody can hoof it to a moderately-sized university library and scope the literature cross-referenced under "race" and

“science fiction” and “semiotics.” And, yes, there really is that much; even after filtering for “Star Wars” you’ll be left with a huge amount to read. Bearded white men in tweed (and, sure, the occasional geeky black or female or Chicano scholar, too) have been churning out these essays and theses and weighty tomes seemingly nonstop since 1977. And their fodder grew juicier as the trilogy went on. Original *Star Wars* pulled an *Othello*: the only black dude in town was going on a rampage. Then in *Empire Strikes Back*, Vader was revealed to be subservient. Errand boy carrying out the ghostly-white (the Canto slur “gweilo,” which you could translate roughly as “white ghost devil,” has never seemed more appropriate) Emperor’s commands. By the end of that film, audiences learned that Vader had even shirked parental responsibilities for his half-breed ever-passing boy.

The son screamed in horror. We’d *like* to think he was upset realizing that the father he attempted to avenge was actually his enemy, the hulking, beckoning figure responsible for his moments prior symbolic castration. But there may also be Luke’s horror at realizing that he is not pure. My own father-in-law wanted to join the Masons; my wife’s grandfather laughed in his son’s face and told him, “Can’t, son. You’ve got shit in your blood.”

Sure, Harlan was a fucked-up, hateful man. Was his own wife’s native ancestry he was guffawing over. But even today people can flip, realizing their identity is not what they had thought.

And then, wham, *Jedi*. George Lucas’ lowest blow. With repentance, Vader’s blackness falls away. He saves his son from the homoerotic predation of the Emperor and thereby becomes white.

But like I said, there’s been reams written about all of this. A body of literature steadily accreting since well before I was born.

Maybe you want more background but have realized that tenure-rustling academese is not your thing. Then go on, get yourself to the nearest video store (by which obviously I mean your Netflix-connected TV, or your Amazon Prime movie streaming device, or whatever copyright-infringing file-sharing platform is in vogue these days, because, no, that vending machine outside your local grocery is not going to cut it) and see if they’ve got a copy of *Chasing Amy*. Skip ahead to minute eight and let Hooper (although he’s a puppet, parroting words penned by a white guy) tell you bluntly that the melanin-deficient feeble man inside Vader’s shell was yet another assault on young black minds.

No, Hooper the puppet declares, it is *not* true. Michael Jackson and his medically-indicated treatments for blotchy skin be damned, George Schuyler and his creations’ rational response to a world full of hate be damned, Pecola and her Shirley Temple irises be damned, Walter Scott and his now-dead shot-in-the-back post-mortem-handcuffed self be damned,

Hooper insists that *nobody* wants sickly pallor to displace beautiful black. Dark skin separates man from ape.

But let's be clear: there are *plenty* of people who wish their epidermal melanocytes would engender no mistreatment, no hitch in an interlocutor's words, no risk of being shot dead or arm-barred dead or rough-riden dead by a cop. But none of that is a problem of the skin. Those are problems of the mind, and not even problems with the functional-melanocyte-bearer's mind: they're all problems with somebody else's. Problem being that another person, instead of seeing a dark-skinned *human being*, registers only skin tone before imagining that he's looking at an inevitably-violent hypersexualized willfully-impoverished likely-ignorant drug-dealing, ball-hogging thug.

Vader never seemed broke, and there's no evidence the Empire was dabbling in the drug trade, but the dude was saddled with all the other stereotypes. Only way he could've seemed more dangerous to white America would be dialogue peppered with slang the masses didn't yet understand, words too new to have trickled into suburban vogue.

Yet Vader, once good, was shucked to reveal Sebastian Shaw. A white guy. And then Lucas decided to loop back to the beginning, really cement the thing. Still-good young Anakin was portrayed by Jake Lloyd, a white kid. He grew into Hayden Christensen, another white kid. By then he had some anger issues, sure, but was still mostly attempting to do the right thing. Wasn't until he fully embraced his new hateful rageful identity that the black superdermis enveloped him. He became big bad black Darth Vader. In contrast to the good-hearted Anakins, who were all white kids. Even the boy in the crease-lined photograph that was handed to me outside the public library, pulled from the purse of a slow-lipped woman who had moments prior thickly congratulated me on my own three-month-old baby and wanted to show me a picture of hers.

"His name is Anakin Jeff," she told me. Which of course got me thinking, *another Anakin, another white kid*. But then she said, "He lives with his sister. I couldn't take good care of him. But it makes me mad. She don't call him Anakin. Only calls him A.J. Upsets me. It upsets me." I'd handed the photograph back to her and she was fussing with its corners, her fingers moving clumsily. And I'd leaned forward, using a palm to support my daughter's head, because the woman's speech impediment made her words difficult for me to understand. I shook my head in sympathy and asked, "You get to see him often?"

"I saw him last year. Thanksgiving. My sister made dinner and it was nice. But she would only call him A.J. I got so mad."

With her, I did not discuss the political implications of bringing into the world yet another pale-skinned Anakin. I assume she meant no harm. Even Lucas probably harbored no ill intent. But, independent of its creator's wishes, every viewing of *Star Wars* conveys meaning

to its audience. Given our history, our mythologies, our collective knowledge, *Star Wars* has some serious racial implications.

Which, as I mentioned, there's no need for me to explain. These ideas have been analyzed by many. Every moment of the films dissected, multifarious meanings lain bare for all to see.

But that's only for the films as they are. New analysis has a purpose once we step into the action and change things.

Daniel Dennett be damned, let's say we toss our chips down on the homunculus theory of the mind. The idea that a tiny person inside each skull is responsible for humanity's apparent free will. Which perhaps you're hesitant to believe. "There can't be a little man inside," you might say. "Cartesian theater breaks down with infinite regress," you say. But there's a retort. The retort is, *fuck you*. What do *you* know? Where was Darth Vader's free will coming from, after all, if not the homunculus-like white man inside? And what good are your earthbound philosophical arguments when we're considering a galaxy long ago and far, far away? We're not talking *here* and *now* but *then* and *there*, a place and time when there is noise in space, and fire. And, "infinite regress," you say? Nobody's talking infinite regress. Just *one* more regression. One single homunculus riding inside shriveled Sebastian's skull. That is all we need.

And it's something we can test. Because here we are, two hours into *Jedi*, standing beside the pathetic dying father held up by his son's two (!) hands. It's the perfect opportunity. So, go ahead. Swing an axe down on that scarified cantaloupe rind. You can do it. God won't mind. The guy's a baddie; he murdered billions on Alderaan. And he's dying anyway.

Put some muscle into it. Make sure you split open the destroyer's skull. With one single solid blow, before the dude's kid gets wise and starts plying you with those Jedi mind tricks of his. Cleave flesh and bone messily away. And then — *yes, what then?* — what if, what would it change to learn that the homunculus tumbling forth from his skull was black?

It means Vader's final salvation is no longer tied to the white skin of the inner mastermind. Infinite regress, my ass. Hooper just needs you to break open *one* more matryoshka shell to set matters right.

*inspired by Terrance Hayes's "SQUAWK"*