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Space Cowboys and Alien Landscapes

Feminist Science Studies and Environmental Narratives in Leigh Brackett's Science Fiction

Bridgitte Barclay

Queen of Space Opera Leigh Brackett's life-long work and her first script of *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980) made the Star Wars franchise possible. Her space cowboy Han remains in the final version of *The Empire Strikes Back*, her snow lizards become tauntauns, and Luke's twin Jedi sister Nellith is altered and rounded into Leia, his love interest (Brackett wrote a love triangle with Leia, Luke, and Han). Despite these differences and others, the film and the Star Wars franchise are indebted to Brackett not only for what remains of her first draft in the final film version but also because she shaped the very space opera genre, which mixes science fiction, science fantasy, crime, and western adventure genres. She was an accomplished screenwriter when Lucas approached her for *The Empire Strikes Back*, having written *Rio Bravo* (1959) and co-written *The Big Sleep* (1946) with William Faulkner. And her pulps and novels established her as an authority in science fiction, most notably, with themes that predate later feminist and environmental science fiction (SF). And it was recently discovered, she was the first woman nominated for the Hugo Award for *The Long Tomorrow* (1955), a novel that denounces the toxic violence of militarized science and venerates resistance (Walton 2017). Brackett's influence in SF made the Star Wars saga possible and laid the groundwork for feminist science studies and ecocritical studies with her disruption of science-nature binaries and her use of narrative drag to both romanticize landscapes and critique masculinist frontierism.

Brackett's integration of multiple genres is integral to the development of the Star Wars franchise and its space opera milieu. The "Queen of Space Opera" title was derisive, meant to mock her more "trashy" romantic version of "hard" SF . What she was derided for by some men of her SF era, Lucas was praised for by the '70s because of her influence in the genre in the preceding decades. She influenced authors and fans, changing the direction of SF. For instance, she asked her mentee, up and coming Ray Bradbury, to complete the second half of "Lorelei of the Red Mist" for *Planet Stories* when Director Howard Hawks hired her for the detective film *The Big Sleep*. Author George RR Martin writes about Brackett's influence on his work, noting specifically Brackett's character Erik John Stark as one of "the great space-opera heroes" (Martin 2015). Michael Moorcock writes that Brackett's work changed the field, pointing out that besides her influence on his own work, "Others who have acknowledged her influence include Harlan Ellison, [...], Marion Zimmer Bradley, Andre Norton, [...], Tanith Lee" . He

writes, "Leigh Brackett is one of the true godmothers of the New Wave"[1] and that "she antedated cyberpunk[2] by some fifty years" (Moorcock 2002). That influence shaped space opera and, eventually, the Star Wars saga.

Additionally, she shaped the SF community as a member of Los Angeles Science Fantasy Society (LASFS) and helped shape conversations about inclusivity with fans and authors. As Rich Dana points out, LASFS was famously women and queer-friendly with some of the fanboys using the derogatory term 'fairy palace' for the society's building (Dana 2020). Some of LASFS's fan publications not only showcase Brackett's work and show her contributions to meetings but also the work of her friend, lesbian Satanist Tigrina, one of Edyth Eyde's pseudonyms. Eyde, who published the 1947 *Vice Versa: America's Gayest Magazine* – what is presumed to be the first LGBTQ magazine – under the name Lisa Ben, was a target for public harassment. In 1942, several men wrote into the fanmag *Voice of the Imagination* to sexually threaten Eyde (DIY History Transcripts). While I haven't found similar threats made against Brackett in my archival research, I have found Brackett's fan mag mockery of Campbell's *Astounding*, from which she pulled publications because of sexism (Liptak 2013). She shaped the SF writer and fan community with her involvement in LASFS at a time in which diverse foks' public participation was important to shifting the genre for later decades. The sexism and heterosexism that Brackett and others fought is indicative of long-term tensions in the larger SF community. Justine Larbalestier writes, for instance, about teenage Isaac Asimov's 1938 letter to an SF mag supporting fewer women in the stories, writing, "When we want science fiction, we don't want swooning dames" (quoted in Larbalestier 118-119). In later years, Asimov became the notorious breast-grabbing, around-the-table-chasing big name that women knew to avoid on the elevator at cons. Brackett shaped the SF community as the anti-Asimov.

This SF gender problem is all the more reason to recognize Brackett's work as a precursor to the way feminist SF, feminist science studies, and ecocriticism also undo binaries. Her work consistently critiques gender conventions, militarized science, polarization of science and nature, and full trust in any institution – gender, Jedi, or Empire. In writing about the era of *Star Wars*, Jane L. Donawerth and Carol A. Kolmerten write that feminist science fiction texts of the 1960s and '70s offered "[…] anarchic governments, revised sciences, and a debate on the use of violence to achieve change," and Brackett did that in the decades before (Donawerth and Kolmerton, 11). Her 1955 *The Long Tomorrow* is set in a post-apocalyptic world in which "nature" and science are severely opposed, warning that such polarization is as – if not more – dangerous than unmediated scientific hubris. In the novel, most of the remaining population is anti-technoscience and scientists/science users are stoned to death in the name of "the" religion. The early inklings of Empire-Jedi tensions are clear. Brackett critiques that polarization and trust in any institution as problematic.

With her dark critique of humanity's gods and sciences, Brackett laid groundwork for later feminist science studies. Theorists like Evelyn Fox Keller, Donna Haraway, and Gillian Rose shaped ecocriticism. In the '60s and '70s, feminist science studies emphasized "the impact of limited narratives on how we do science (the questions we ask, what we observe, how we interpret) and the impact of ideology on scientific narratives" (Barclay and Tidwell, x). Who does science matters, just as who writes science fiction matters. So Brackett's consistent assertion that the way we tell stories about the world are complex, important, and cannot be polarized predates later material ecocriticism, which emerges from feminist science studies and emphasizes how linguistic and cultural constructions impact materiality – manifest destiny equals extraction, preservation, and species extinction, for instance. Brackett knew that.

[1] New Wave is a term for what many women SF authors had been doing for decades (centuries even, as the mother of SF Mary Shelley did in *Frankenstein*): using science to talk about politics, culture, humanity, etc. The term also often implies literary rather than genre fiction (as though the two are opposed). Carol Emshwiller and Joanna Russ are two of the fantastic authors considered New Wave.

[2] A term exemplified in Star Wars with scrappiness and technology.

The same complication of these dichotomies arises in *The Empire Strikes Back*. Jedi resistance to the Empire's militarized techno-science destruction seems to pit religion against science, but that binary is complicated. It's not a good-bad battle. She critiques the institutions. In Brackett's script, for instance, Luke is drawn much more into the dark side by Vader, who is not his father in her version. After several psychic battles with Darth Vader, one of which remains in the film, Luke says in Brackett's script, "I almost beat him at that, but the wrong way… I was so full of hate, and rage, and the desire for revenge. I was using the dark side of the force without even realizing it, and he was making me destroy myself" (Savreda 2021).We see much more of the Anakin and Kylo Ren-style darkness in Brackett's Luke than we do in *The Empire Strikes Back*, and that echoes the flawed, not always likable male protagonists that Brackett often writes.

Brackett's other uber-masculine adventurers also disrupt binaries, enabling romanticized landscapes and critiques of masculinist frontierism. Brackett described herself as masculine and was described by many of her friends that way. I read her male protagonists as drag, a way into "male worlds" and a way to disrupt those worlds, much like women used androgynous names or pen names to get published in SF mags and to mess up their generic conventions. Jane Donawerth's definition of "cross-dressing narrators" is useful in analyzing Brackett's protagonists as "rebellious act[s]" (Donawerth, 111). Donawerth cites Joanna Russ' argument that women SF authors use male narrators and protagonists to perform other-than-woman acts. While Russ argues that SF can escape gender myths and forge new ones, the use of such male protagonists not only makes publications easier for women, but also subverts gender norms, like male conqueror or colonizer.

Brackett's male adventurers, then, provide a way into publishing adventure SF with romanticized landscapes and critique traditionally masculine frontierism. As opposed to conquest, Brackett revels in landscapes and adventures and advocates for the marginalized. In midcentury, Brackett's use of narrative drag was an equitable way around that, enabling her to revel in the dark landscapes she loved with flawed male characters through which she could critique masculinist narratives of domination and control. Michael Moorcock writes of his disappointment at the original *Star Wars* because it seemed a diluted copy of Brackett. He notes "Han Solo's origins lie" in Brackett's "battered," "star-weary spacers" and "her lone outlaws" with "something eating [their] heart[s]," "pasts [they aren't] proud of," and a love of adventure." He points out that her stories also are about loss, with planets "millions of years in [their] dying" and a "sense of romantic desolation," which recalls SF's "Gothic roots" – Ann Radcliffe, Mary Shelley and the Brontes (DIY History Transcripts). Such romantic desolation can be seen in her script's settings: the ice planet, bog planet, Cloud City, and asteroid fields.

Brackett's outcast male adventurers are at home in such dying planets and extinct civilizations, echoing mid century atomic fears and resonating with current environmental concerns. Her work imbued space frontiers with an understanding of westward expansion's genocides and extinctions, with the fear of atomic-era destruction, as well as a critical hope. She has a way of both speculating about earth's extinctions while also imagining different worlds with more just practices. For me, a Cold War child of Star Wars before I fell in love with Brackett, there's a familiarity in her worlds. The destruction of Alderaan as I watched in my elementary school years and the Resistance nomadism that followed – that *Red Dawn* feel of Gen X childhood – made Brackett's worlds a familiar haunted home I immediately fell in love with when I read her work years later.

Brackett's marginalized nomad characters also critique corporate colonial extraction. In her 1944 *Shadow Over Mars*, her ragtag band of resistors – wolf-headed humanoid Beudach, small bird-creature Kyra, rebel Martian-rights activist Mayo McCall, and Martian-born Earthling Rick raised by Indigenous Martians – fight (no joke) the Terran Exploitation mining company that is enslaving Indigenes and depleting what's left of Martian resources. In Brackett's 1951 "Woman from Altair," an alien seeks revenge on her colonizing captor-husband who

exploited her home planet and blackmailed her into marrying him. The narrative clearly critiques the capitalist colonizers and sides with the colonized resistance. And Brackett even mocks Star Wars' Resistance for its righteous colonizer certitude and Othering in her Empire script with intelligent, organized indigenous ice monsters – her wampas – attacking the base. John Saavedra writes that Bracket "has fun portraying the Rebellion as a group of bumbling idiots […] Their attempt to repel an exceptionally organized attack by the ice monsters is perhaps best accompanied by the Benny Hill Theme" (Saavreda 2021). And, though Yoda's mockery of whiny Luke is still entertaining in the *Empire* film, Brackett's wise froggish Minch (Yoda's name in her script) amps up the ridicule. All of this shines a different light on even Star Wars' "heroes," highlighting them as nomadic colonizers who just feel they can plop down wherever they want.

Brackett's work remains fundamental to SF, Star Wars, and ecocriticism. Much of her era's problematic romanticizing of Indigenous cultures remains in her work, but her critiques of capitalist-extractive-militaristic science help establish later feminist science and environmental narratives. Her love of a wide universe of fantastical beings remains important and reminds me of the work of SF author Charlie Jane Anders, who has written glowingly about Brackett. Prosaic, proletariat Rey; grieving mother General Organa leading the Resistance while disenchanted Uncle Luke pouts on Temple Island; Han's demise at the hands of Kylo's darkness; and the undaunted fight in the face of failure – all of these in the Star Wars saga are indebted to Brackett's work that shaped the genre. As *Star Wars* women Rey, Jyn Erso, Rose Tico, Ahsoka Tano, and others extend Leia's legacy, it is also important to celebrate Leigh Brackett's impact and the work to still be done in SF. Some more anti-Asimov energy is still called for.

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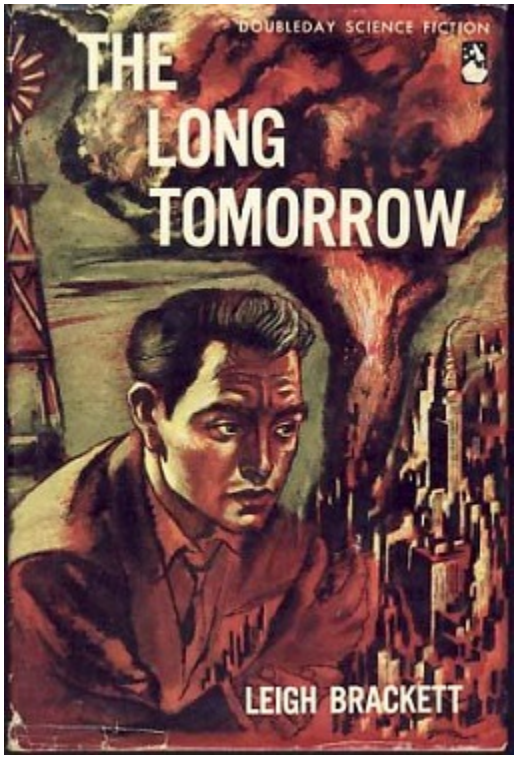

Cover of the first edition (1955) of Leigh Brackett's *The Long Tomorrow*. Cover art by Irv Docktor. (Wikimedia, Fair Use)