

A beautiful, broad spectrum

PORTRAIT BY FRANK, COURTESY OF SLOANE LEONG

Sloane Leong is charting a course through the intergalactic world of indigenous science fiction

BY SARAH HANSELL
STAFF WRITER

Growing up on Maui with no comic scene to speak of, Sloane Leong started teaching herself how to create comics at age 12. By age 16 she'd self-published her first comic, "Crooked Root," a "scary comedic short" about a bunny and a cyclops.

On March 7 she will release her first solo, ongoing, long-form comic, "Prism Stalker," an "alien intergalactic space opera" story drawn from her ancestral history and experiences as a native Hawaiian.

In a comic's landscape dominated by white male creators and characters, "Prism Stalker" boasts an all-feminine cast, and tells the story of a violet-haired, brown-skinned refugee struggling to connect with her ancestry while forced to work in the hive of her insectoid captors.

"Prism Stalker" revolves around themes of survival, displacement and identity on the surface, but also addresses interesting and relevant topics like the racism in aesthetics.

Published by Image Comics, the series is slated for 25 issues. Leong's next upcoming project, A Map to the Sun, a slice-of-life girl's basketball drama, will come out in spring of next year.

Sarah Hansell: *You've said that Prism Stalker is a very personal story for you. Can you talk about how "Prism Stalker" resonates with you or reflects your own experience?*

"Growing up and seeing all these American comics where it's just like teams of really buff violent dudes, it was pretty stifling. It's quite male centric, it's like a boys club."

Sloane Leong: "Prism Stalker" focuses on Vep, who is a refugee and is forced to live away from her home planet that underwent a natural disaster. So a lot of this actually reflected back to my ancestral history in Hawaii, and the interesting, scary, traumatic politics that involve the overturn of the Hawaiian monarchy, and commercializing pineapples and other plants too, and how that affected the native people and also the immigrants that came to work there.

So I'm blowing up that part of Hawaiian history into this alien intergalactic space opera. Because it's not really talked about that much, this sort of quick colonization of people and assimilation, in the sci-fi genre, that's from the perspective of a native person.

S.H.: *Speaking of the main character, Vep, the comic begins really grounded in her connection to family, place, language and spirituality, and her forcible displacement from all of those things. Can you talk about sci-fi and other worlds as the vehicle to explore these themes that are so relevant and real in our own world?*

S.L.: I think the big thing that you're introduced to in the first issue is the language barrier between her and her family. The young people are separated from the elders so that they can more easily assimilate into this new galactic common tongue and their customs.

I wanted to use that to drive home how

crucial language is as a connection to the past, as a way to transmit culture, and also as a way to shape how we think about our environment and the people around us and relationships. Eventually she gets to a place where she can use language to gain some agency, but it's still shaped by the society and influenced from these people around her.

S.H.: *In the press release announcing "Prism Stalker," you described the type of comics you want to create using the term "quantum indigenous futurism." Can you explain that to me?*

S.L.: Everyone uses the term Afrofuturism, and I have to give props to black futurists because they're always cutting edge in sci-fi. So quantum futurism is for people that are trying to connect with their ancestral past and their future. For me, that's connecting with my native past, basically my different heritages, but the one that I feel most connected to is my Hawaiian heritage. Just being an indigenous person to Hawaii has a big impact on how I want to tell stories and on who I am as a person.

S.H.: *The comic is an explosion of vivid colors and biological details, quite different from what many people think of with traditional Western sci-fi, with moody lighting*

and machines. What inspired the comic's aesthetic?

S.L.: I would consider this bio-punk. It's very into biotechnology and more organic forms of architecture. I guess I was really inspired just by the body, by diseases like cancer and just the idea of the Hayflick limit, and superseding that, being able to encode data into our biology, basically encode any sort of data into our DNA.

I think what inspired that was growing up on Maui. It's one of the most geographically diverse topographies, concentrated into such a tiny place. So being surrounded by oceans, by volcanic desert, forest, jungles, not to mention the aquatic landscapes as well.

When you think of sci-fi, you're going to think of clean white spaceships and smooth angular technology, and there's hardly any color, it's maybe blue and white and barely anything else. So I wanted to just counter that. I think there's also a cultural, I guess it's a sort of racism, that is tied into really bright colors. In the West, people think it's tacky — a lot of things, like Mexican folk art, especially in the fine art world. I feel like there's a lot of racism about aesthetics, so I just wanted to grab hold of that and really dive into it.

S.H.: *The comics industry has traditionally been dominated by stories by and about white men, and the statistics continue to be extremely skewed. As of autumn 2017, comics historian Tim Hanley reported 15.6 percent of DC's comic creators and 18 percent of Marvel's were women. And I haven't even been able to find statistics on creators of color. How has this landscape impacted you as woman of color comic creator?*

S.L.: It's definitely made me want to just really focus on my own experiences. With Prism Stalker the whole cast is female or female presenting, because it's also a lot of aliens, and the pronoun that everyone uses is "she," that's just the neutral pronoun. Growing up and seeing all these American comics where it's just like teams of really buff violent dudes, it was pretty stifling. It's quite male centric. It's like a boys club. I just wanted to have, "oh, this is just all women everywhere."

It's slowly changing though, with the rise of Kickstarter and Patreon, where women, just non-men, can go and have support from their audiences and make work that way, and they're just as successful if not more. Recently it's been really exciting seeing that change, finally. It's been a long time coming.

S.H.: *Who do you hope will pick "Prism Stalker" up, what impact do you hope it will have on its readers?*

S.L.: I think most readers will be able to get something out of it, even if it's just on the surface, but even the subtext is not very subtext-like. I have a lot of inner dialogue with the main character and she has a lot of strong feelings about herself and her displacement, and her disconnection with her culture. I think it'll resonate with a lot of people who have felt displaced or like an outsider.

