

You're listening to Imaginary Worlds, a show about how we create them and why we suspend our disbelief. I'm Eric Molinsky.

When I started this podcast, I always wanted to get to the point where I could bring on other voices of people who could tell stories I can't because I'm always going to be stuck in my perspective. I'm often reminded of that when talking with my wife Serena, who is Chinese-American. As a kid, I could easily imagine myself as all these different characters from *Star Wars* to *Ghostbusters*. But Serena was so starved for any kind of media representation; she used to watch reruns of this cringe-worthy cartoon from the early 1960s called Hashimoto Mouse.

CLIP

So I was really interested when Sam Kaden Lai contacted me on Facebook about the series *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, and what a profound effect it's had him. In case you don't know, *Avatar: The Last Airbender* has nothing to do with the James Cameron movie *Avatar*. Total coincidence.

Some of what Sam told me about *Avatar: The Last Airbender* and his reaction to it touched on similar issues that I explored in my episode about the Japanese series *Ghost in the Shell*, but a lot of his insights really surprised me. So I invited Sam on to the show to essentially steer this episode.

Sam, welcome.

Sam: Hey, thanks.

Eric: But you're not actually here with me in Brooklyn, you're in Ireland. What are you studying?

Sam: (ANSWERS)

Eric: So how old were you when you started watching *Avatar*?

Sam: (ANSWERS)

Eric: I didn't watch the show when it came out 2005 because I had just animation and was delving into my new career in radio. So I started watching it after you contacted me, and it's great. But I was also looking at as someone who used to work in the industry, so I'm thinking, "Wow, the storyboarding in that sequence was amazing." Take me through your reactions to it as a kid, and what you've discovered since?

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So this story begins at Halloween. And not a particular Halloween. Just any Halloween

Mammatha: Halloween is always such a weird time for me, like even now I always feel like I have to keep in mind my color and I'm always thinking like well who are the people of color I can dress up as.

This is my friend Mammatha. She's a med student in Chicago. We were just commiserating about this yearly dilemma we both face.

Mammatha: Or like and if I'm not going to be a person of color, I'm going to be like an animal or like an inanimate object like BB-8 from Star Wars. Like I don't feel comfortable dressing up as a white character at this point.

Sam: Just think like if I put on the Harry Potter glasses and drew the lightning bolt, which I have, like, I'm not Harry Potter, I'm Asian Harry Potter.

Mammatha: Yeah, exactly, and everyone would say that. Or you're like Cho-Chang and Harry Potter's long lost son. That would be what people would say to you. No one would just be like, oh, you're Harry Potter.

To my credit, I didn't just dress up as Harry Potter, I dressed up as alternate universe Slytherin Harry Potter. That's not the point. The point is we're both huge Fantasy fans, but a lot of the times being a non-white fan in a genre that's, like, let's be honest, all about this glorious mythological European heritage. It's hard to feel like you fit in.

Mammatha: Like I literally cannot imagine myself as a character in Lord of the Rings. Even if I tried. Which is hilarious because there are so many ridiculous characters in Lord of the Rings but I can't imagine a person of color. I can imagine elves, and like dwarves and whatever is there, but I can't imagine an Indian person, just hanging out. Which is so outrageous.

I mean, I get it. People write what they know. And what people in a western culture know is mostly Europe and mostly white. Which is why *this* show, felt like it came out of nowhere.

Clip: *Last Airbender* opening theme.

It's *Avatar: the Last Airbender*. You may know it from its terrible movie adaptation directed by M Knight Shyamalan. The movie we pretend doesn't exist. I don't want to talk about that. I want to talk about the animated show, *Last Airbender* and its sequel *the Legend of Korra*. Together they comprise a series that really broke the mold in terms of children's entertainment.

Elaine: They're like it's really good for a kids show, it's not really a kids show

It's a show that has fans with Harry Potter levels of devotion.

Seiko: Oh my god I have to watch this show! So I watched it and then I made everyone that I love watch it also.

And especially among a certain demographic.

Mammatha: It's a very specific thing that Asian Americans love this show.

Because while the show was unique and beautiful in a way that appealed to everyone.

Emily: It wasn't the same old dragons and castles kind of thing

The world of the show especially appealed to me as an Asian American.

Viet: Who produced this? Because this is basically for me. This is for us.

So what is it about this world that's got me and so many other Asian Americans obsessed? Could it be that there's something uniquely Asian American about it? And could I even go so far as to say it's the *most* Asian American show *ever*?

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Eric: Wait, sorry to interrupt but the most Asian-American show ever?

Sam: Yeah.

Eric: Were the creators Asian or Asian American?

Sam: They're two guys -- Michael Dante DiMartino and Bryan Konietzko -- and I don't know their specific heritage, but I've been told from people who worked with them that they refer to themselves as two white guys who were very influenced by Asian culture.

Eric: Huh. That scenario doesn't usually end well.

Sam: No, it doesn't. Which is why this show had to have done something *really right* for it to be as beloved as it is.

Eric: All right, well tell me more.

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At the core it's your typical western fantasy epic, with a group of magical kids trying to defeat an evil overlord, but it's set in an Asian influenced world. In this world there's four nations: the Fire Nation, the Water Tribe, the Earth Kingdom, and the Air Nomads. Each has a distinct look that's inspired by various Asian cultures and, of course, the element they're based on. The water tribes live in the poles surrounded by ice. Air nomads live high in the mountains, etc. Within each nation are benders, individuals who have the ability to control the element of their people.

Then there's Ang, the show's fun-loving, 12 year-old protagonist. The chosen one, if you will. Ang is the only person who can bend all four elements because he's this reincarnated spirit being called the Avatar. It's the Avatar's job to bring balance to the world, which in Ang's case means stopping the endless war that the Firelord is waging against the other three nations.

I know there's nothing distinctly Asian American about what I just described. Strictly speaking, there's no America in the Avatar world, or Asia, for that matter. It's all just the world of the story. So unlike some other animated shows I grew up watching, like *American Dragon: Jake Long* for example, none of the characters are explicitly Asian American.

Or are they? Because they *look* Asian, and they live in an Asian influenced world. But the kids talk and interact like Americans. Take this fever dream of an episode, "The Beach," where the teenage villains of the series are on vacation. And they go to a beach party.

Clip: "The Beach"

There's volleyball, flirting, a house party, and popular kids. But it's all happening under Japanese-looking pagodas. The party fliers are written in Chinese letters. And the food...it's the kind of food I grew up with. Chopped vegetables in bamboo steamers, pork buns, fish with the head still on it. And the food is just there...on tables in establishing shots, characters picking at it with chopsticks...

No one is commenting on how weird or gross the food is. They're just not commenting on it. Or they're celebrating it. Because this how the world of the show works. You're almost more surprised to see beach volleyball than ginseng tea.

See, when it comes to my life as a Taiwanese-American, nothing sums it up better than a table full of Asian food at Thanksgiving dinner. Asian food in American contexts is all of my most visceral memories. These scenes, the cross-generational, slang-filled English conversation happening around a plate of Peking Duck....it totally blew my mind. I knew that scene. I recognized that scene from my life.

And I wasn't the only one who was flipping out. Here I'm talking to Elaine, a writer and actress in Houston.

Sam: Do you remember that scene where Aang is like trying to reconcile these two groups that are fighting as they're crossing a Canyon? But he's just like really obsessed with egg custards?

Elaine: Yeah, yeah, yeah!

Clip: "The Great Divide"

Sam: And then he's like oh my god! An egg custard! And he eats it. And I was like "THAT'S MY FOOD!"

Elaine: Yeah I was obsessed with egg custards when I was a kid, like I was *obsessed* with egg custards and my mom would make—I was obsessed with egg custards.

Egg custards are such a *specific* thing to love. This is a fantasy world, the team behind the show could just as easily have made up some vaguely Asian sounding dessert, but they chose an egg custard and it was like a message just for me. Like they saw my childhood and they plucked out this one memory.

That's what feels so good about this show. It's both Asian and American, but it doesn't rely on these general impressions about what that means. Because there's no such thing as a single Asian American experience. If you just consider our heritages alone, we're the result of thousands of ethnicities and regions interacting and intermarrying, migrating and mixing. No one narrative can sum that up. But what we do share, in billions of different arrangements, is some of these little details, pieces that make up our memories of home and family. This show is meticulous and careful and *tender* with those details. Someone cared. Someone did their research.

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Nowhere is this more evident than in the effort the creators put into choreographing fights scenes. Remember those benders in each nation that can control the elements? Well each style of bending—so like waterbending, or earthbending for example, is a style of martial arts. And what that looks like on screen is the characters doing kung fu while rocks and whips of water fly through the air. It's a beautiful, thrilling thing to witness. And I think it's because you're not just watching a bunch of cartoon characters wax on/wax off.

Here check this out. It's a from a behind the scenes segment Nickelodeon made.

Clip: “Avatar: Creating the Legend –Earthbending”

Each bending form is based on real life martial art, and not “loosely based on” either. They had multiple martial arts experts choreographing fight scenes, recording them for reference and then handing them to the artists and animators to replicate frame by frame. And what's more, none of the bending styles are purely for show. They're tied to each nation's cultural and spiritual traditions. Again, none of this was absolutely necessary, but someone made the choice to treat every inch of the source material with respect.

And this is how it worked with every detail in the show.

Emily: Just stuff like the way the food looks—glisten different colors. The types of streets that they have. Lighting is specific to these places.

This is Emily, who worked as a background painter on Legend of Korra, the sequel series to Last Airbender.

Emily: Well it's just over the course of the show I built up a huge folder of reference images. And when I went to Korea I just shot a ton of reference pictures. Like when you're painting lighting and stuff? It's weirdly important to have been in the place.

That's right, she's talking about making it all truly Asian, down to the way light falls on things.

Emily: I think everyone cared very deeply about making something that looked authentically Asian, like there were so many Asian people that worked on the show.

Maybe it was a diverse team of artists. Maybe it was just a team that really cared. Whatever it was, the end result of all these beautiful little details coming together is a world that's fresh and believable. And isn't that what draws us into all of our favorite fictional worlds? The beautiful details? Except this time the details were drawn from a world I recognized.

Now the show doesn't *exactly* replicate my world, it certainly isn't an accurate representation of Asia, but, as Elaine pointed out to me, that's not what fantasy worlds do.

Elaine: Lord of the Rings, Game of thrones, whatever, they have all this liberty to take...England...and then make a whole world out of it that doesn't have to be a one on one parallel to England, right? And so yeah with Avatar they've taken all this Asian culture and kind of sign post it so it's kind of similar, but like, they took it and they were allowed to create a whole world.

Now of course, creating this kind of world involves conflating a *lot* of different cultures, which can be kind of troubling. I hate it when fantasy worlds have a token Pan-Asian themed country. But in the case of Avatar, the mixing didn't bother me or anyone I talked to. Here's Viet, a New England based writer.

Viet: it didn't trouble me very much watching the show because I feel like I'm a hybrid, I'm also on the border, growing up you know as a Vietnamese American I understand mashups and remixes and all these things.

Despite our distinct cultural origins, in this country, Asian cultures have mixed and collided. My parents are from Taiwan, but I grew up watching Anime and eating Korean food at my best friend's house.

I think what Avatar gets right here is it has this hybrid Asian identity, yes, but it has multiple Asian identities as well. Remember, there are four very different nations in this world. And within each nation, every location, community, and individual is fully realized. It's not one mashup, it's a thousand mashups. Which is the most realistic representation of Asian Americans I've ever seen.

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Of course, that's just how I see it. Obviously I don't speak for all Asian Americans. So I talked to a whole range of people from all across the country, and asked them if they felt similarly.

I wanted to hear especially from people of South or Southeast Asian descent because I know that the show has a much more East Asian bent to it. I wondered what drew them in. Here's Viet again.

Viet: There's all this spirituality that permeates the entire show, you know, balance of your chi and balance within your role in the world, your place in the world. Balance between humans—human civilization and nature. All that stuff just seemed like Eastern philosophy to me. And I was like, I totally know about all of this. And I get it right off the bat and you do not have to explain it to me.

Clip: TBD

Viet: I was like, Wow, this—this is—I can't believe this is on a mainstream American show. That's actually one of the thoughts that I had. I remember telling like a friend after I watched this, like "how did they slip Buddhism like into a children's show, like who allowed that to happen?"

My friend Nhu, who grew up in a Buddhist household, even told me Avatar got them to start going to their local temple.

Nhu: I would be lying if it wasn't like in some small part like because Avatar the Last Airbender and Korra made like Buddhism cool again? For me. Well not like cool again, but I think seeing that have power in a fictional form really did—you know it's not like Buddhism isn't everywhere else as well. It's referenced in other things but, you know like Zen potato chips is not, you know, an empowering thing.

I think this is a part of something bigger that Avatar gets at; a different kind of Asian American story. The stories of diaspora, about growing up in an immigrant family. Experiencing another world and another life—from a distance. And this is where I have to admit that when I've said "Asian-American," I actually mean second or third generation Americans. Because our parents, the immigrants themselves—don't see the show the way we do.

I realized this during my conversation with Mammatha, while we were talking about Indian influences in the show.

Mammatha: I mean the name Avatar, in itself though, is like—Avatar is an Indian word, you know, um it's likely Sanskrit. I mean that word holds a lot of significance in Hindu Indian culture specifically so I think that for me—just the core of the fact that the show is based on that concept, this idea of a demigod being reborn to save humanity is something I grew up with my whole life growing up in a Hindu household. And I remember, I remember the first time I talked to my parents about watching Avatar the Last Airbender and my mom was like

“Ooh Avatar, it’s called Avatar? What’s it about?” Of course once I explained the show to her she was like “Okay...” she didn’t really get it. She was like “okay that sounds cool I guess.”

Sam: I feel like that is one of those quintessentially Asian American experiences where you get excited about something that you think you understand from your heritage and like to the parents you’re totally missing the point, but to you, it’s like “Ahh this is me!”

Mammatha: Yeah, exactly, exactly.

I found that a lot of Avatar fans like the show as a kid, but really love it as an adult. Maybe that’s because as adults we’re getting to a point where we finally want to understand our parents and the world they came from. Avatar is this lovingly, carefully packaged version of that world, diluted and scrambled, but in a way that we can begin to understand, or at least begin to deal with.

This was especially true for Viet, who saw his own family’s journey through Aang’s.

Viet: Aang’s story, um, is I think explicitly linked to the refugee/immigrant narrative.

Here’s a spoiler if you haven’t seen the show. The subtitle of the first series is hinting at this awful revelation you get in the first couple of episodes. Aang, the Avatar kid, really is the *last airbender*. The fire nation, threatened by his existence, but knowing only that he was born an airbender, launches a genocide that wipes out all the air nomads. Aang alone manages to escape before the attack, on the back of his flying Bison, Appa.

Viet: He got on Appa and sailed out into the Ocean or sky in a storm and then he never saw his family again and that’s very much the narrative of the Vietnamese diaspora. My parents basically did the same thing. They each got on individual rafts and sailed out into the sea knowing full well that they would never see their country, their parents, their family members, their homeland ever again.

Aang disappears for 100 years before he’s found frozen in an iceberg. When he emerges, the war is still happening.

Viet: He wakes up and everyone’s literally gone, everyone’s dead. And he left them all behind

Clip: TBD

Viet: That’s something that really, really spoke to me, I remember, and basically got me hooked on the show, too. Because this is about loss of home and all this trauma he’s experiencing and trying to work out. And now he’s homeless and trying to find a place for himself in the world.

It’s possible that the Last Airbender and the Legend of Korra are ways through which we process the trauma of our parents and grandparents in Asia: In Airbender it’s the brutal toll of

a neverending war and all the ethnic cleansing wrapped up in it. In the Legend of Korra, which follows the Avatar after Aang, it's the violent growing pains of modernity: industrialization, revolutions, class warfare.

Our parents and grandparents lived through Japanese occupation or the Chinese cultural revolution, or they survived Hiroshima, or escaped the Cambodian genocide.

The world of Avatar is a refraction of those experiences —and its all processed through the lens of a children's story. In this way, we learn of the ugliest violence at a distance, but we never escape the full and deep impact that it's had on our lives and everyone we love.

If that's not an Asian American experience, I don't know what is.

Eric: I'm convinced.

Sam: Except now I'm not sure.

Eric: What do you mean?

Sam: It turns out there are holes in my theory. But they actually reveal deeper issues.

Eric: All right. Let's get to that after the break.

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Elaine was the first to point out holes in my big "Avatar is the best Asian American story" theory.

Elaine: Two of the voice actors? Are actually like Asian American. Because even I think Iroh was even replaced at one point. I think the actor died actually.

Sam: I think the guy that replaced him was a white dude.

Elaine: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

A lot of the people I talked to pointed this out and I agree. It does sting, that this show that got so much right couldn't also put more Asian American actors on the map. In that sense, the show isn't perfect.

But Elaine had another point that kind of caught me off guard.

Elaine: When I talk to people sometimes and they're like I love Asian American cinema. And I was like okay, what Asian American cinema do you love, and they're like "I love Gong Li, I love—" and they start listing all these Hong Kong films and I'm like no, no, no, you're not listening, I'm saying Asian American, you're talking Asian, and a lot of people don't even see

that, right? And I'm like the difference—not that those aren't great films or these aren't great actors—but you have to keep in mind that when they make those films over there, they're not like “oh let's talk about the Asian experience, they're just writing about *the experience* because they're the majority there. They're not like—that's why I don't think Avatar can count as like the one of the best Asian American stories because the world they take place in isn't a world where they are a minority, if that makes sense.

She's right. In the show, no one ethnic group is the minority. But the more I talked with people the more I realized that, for me, the absence of that minority element is exactly what I loved about the show. What made it not just a good Asian American story, but a great one.

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To explain this we need to backtrack a bit. Remember what I was saying about how no one in the show comments on how weird or gross all their food is? Well that's not completely true. There is this *one* time. Ang and his companions are partaking in some water tribe food. Sokka and Katara, who are from the water tribe, are loving it. Ang isn't a fan.

Clip: *Bato of the Water Tribe.*

That's Ang, gagging and spitting it out. It's a tiny moment, but it kind of shook me. Because this is another scene straight out of my life. One that a lot of Asian Americans are familiar with. You bring your food to school and everyone gags and holds their nose. It's one of the first ways you realize you're different and it's the beginning of an ever mounting sense of shame in your own identity. But in this scene...that shame is totally missing. Aang actually tries to hide that he's not into their food, instead of lording it over them. Because in the Avatar universe no one is foreigner. No one's culture is inferior. It's just different. It's kind of the point of Aang's whole quest: to stop the Fire Nation from colonizing the rest of the world.

I'll let Mammatha lay it out.

Mammatha: Yeah Avatar presents a world of what it's like to be Asian without the context of white people. Which is incredible and maybe why I—why so many of us found the show so appealing without realizing that's what was going on.

The more I think about it, the more it makes sense. There's so much to love about being Asian American. But it all gets swallowed up in the shame and the racism. So much so that your idea of yourself becomes defined mostly by—well, white people. How you aren't them. How they see you. What they think of you.

If you think I'm exaggerating, let me take you back to my junior year of high school. I was eating shrimp crackers in history class when the guy sitting in front of me, big, tall, macho-jock dude, turned around and said, “ugh. Asian culture is disgusting.” The whole class heard it. The teacher heard it. No one said anything, so it felt like they agreed.

It's not one jerk, after all. It's random people in the street, your friends and co-workers, celebrities and politicians, all saying the same sorts of things through every possible medium. And if they're not sending the message, they're telling you you're crazy for overreacting. Or falling asleep at the wheel while this happens:

Sam: Our theme once year for homecoming was Oriental express

Mammatha: Whaat?

Here's Mammatha again. At this point she's basically interviewing *me*.

Sam: And we had—they had the Chinese exchange students do a little dragon dance at an assembly?

Mammatha: Oh my god!

Sam: Wasn't even Chinese New Year! It was like this is just our homecoming...what?

Mammatha: Oh my god...how did you feel? At that time? Obviously now...

Sam: At that time I was like "this feels wrong but I don't know how to respond to it."

To America, Asia is a motif. Infinitely less than a culture, never a world in it of itself. We're a category of salad. Or an existential threat to your way of life. Never just ourselves. And when the world tells you the same thing a thousand times, you start to believe it. You think, maybe people are saying it because it's true. Maybe you really don't belong. Maybe people are so hostile or indifferent because you don't *deserve* kindness. Maybe you don't deserve *anything*.

Mammatha: I don't know, you don't feel like a person. You grow up always being like somewhat off from what everyone can understand—and there's so much pain in that.

That's not how everyone reacts. But what I don't think people understand is that racism isn't bullying. It's abuse. And media representation is a part of that. One more voice saying you don't belong. That you don't deserve a story. That you don't deserve a world.

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So what does it look like when someone tells you...that you do? Well, it looks like this.

Clip: *Korrasami*

Mammatha: I'm not someone that cries at TV and movies a lot. But I like freaked out.

This is our last stop. The very last scene of the last series, Legend of Korra. Or rather, our reactions to it.

Mammatha: I mean I just like literally started screaming and rolling around on the floor. If anyone had walked in it would have been really concerning because I was just freaking out

so hard. Cus it was so affirming. It's one of the most affirming things that's happened in my entire life.

Sam: Same

Mammatha: It was affirming of my gayness and at the same time it was confirming of my race, like being a queer person of color represented on media like that? In a way that's so positive and like beautifully done. Was just like the best thing that's ever happened to me. Life has actually been downhill since then.

Sam: Just a reminder that she's been in med school, so...

Eric: Huh. So what happens in this scene exactly?

Sam: It's two young women. Korra on the left, she's the Avatar after Aang. Kickass female lead. And then beside her on the right is Asami, one of her best friends and a total boss in her own right. By the way, Korra is dark skinned; Asami is very visibly East Asian. And they're walking towards this column of light. It's the portal to another world. And they stop. Smile at each other. And then they hold hands, and face each other.

Eric: And that's it?

Sam: That's it. I mean of course there's this whole lead up where the show has been hinting that they're getting closer through the last two seasons. But yeah Korrasami is real. The show went out on the note of an interracial lesbian romance. The show runners confirmed it. Take note, Hollywood. This is the impact you can have in five seconds.

Eric: That gets to a question that I keep thinking about – what should other creative people learn from Avatar? Because the creators of Korra and the Last Airbender are very different from the characters they're representing. The real answer is to have more people of color behind the scenes in positions of power – but that's coming along slowly. So what did they do right?

Sam: This gets to the issue of representation.

Eric: Which is like a big buzzword these days.

Sam: Yeah, it's often dismissed as identity politics, or “people of color are demanding this new thing today. Minorities have decided this is offensive. And here are these new rules about what's good representation and what's bad.” But like if that's what you think representation is about then our reactions to this five-second scene *really* don't make sense.

Eric: Exactly.

Sam: I think we need to we stop thinking of representation in terms of rules and think about relationships.

Eric: In other words, if you're trying to "represent" someone instead of relating with them --- then you're already placing them in the position of the "other."

Sam: Exactly. I wish Hollywood would stop trying to ignore or appease us as a demographic and begin a relationship with us as like people, you know? Human people. And the thing about humans is we're all different and constantly changing and we all want different things. There's no set of rules you can create to deal with all that complexity. Especially when it comes to art and representation. But there is a set of good practices for good relationships. And that's what this is. Relationships.

Eric: Like person-to-person?

Sam: Sure, it's complicated in that you will always make mistakes and have to constantly communicate and be cautious and sensitive and accommodating and humble...but it's simple in that—that's how all healthy relationships function. They're involved. You listen. You pay attention to the little things. You celebrate their perspective and the things they love. You pay attention to the ways they've been hurt. You tell their stories.

It's love and respect, which is what everyone wants and deserves, and what everyone struggles to show. Even more on these large institutional scales. Relationships are hard. When they're wrong they can be absolutely destructive. But when we put the work in, everything can change.

Eric: All right, thanks, Sam. Do you want to help me with the credits?

Sam: Sure. That's it for this week, thank you for listening. Special thanks to Mammatha Challa, Emily Tetri, Viet Hung, Elaine Wang, and Nhu Nyugen, as well to Alex Grant, Seiko Shastri, and Marissa Lee for talking to me. Marissa is one of the founders of racebending.com, which really launched the recent movement for AA representation in media, all because of Avatar. You should check them out.

Eric: Thanks! Imaginary Worlds is part of the Panoply network. You can like the show on Facebook. I tweet at [emolinsky](https://twitter.com/emolinsky). The show's website is imaginaryworldspodcast.org.