

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

ARUKA: Why do you want to hunt?

NARU: Because you all think I can't

The movie Prey is the latest installment in the Predator franchise, which started with Arnold Schwarzenegger in 1987. This film is a prequel which takes place in the 18th century. One of the alien Predators lands in the Great Plains -- and he meets his match in a teenage Comanche girl.

TAABE: I'm not frightened by a bear

NARU: It's not a bear.

SFX: PREDATOR

Prey was a huge hit for the streaming service Hulu, and the movie widely praised for cultural sensitivity. The producer and most of its cast are indigenous to North America.

Prey isn't just part of an action franchise. It reflects a larger, artistic movement called indigenous futurisms which tells stories about indigenous people using sci-fi and fantasy. And in the last several years, there's been a big increase in indigenous futurisms, not just TV and film but also novels, comic books, video games, even works of fine art.

You can also see the influence of indigenous futurism in the new movie Black Panther: Wakanda Forever. The antagonist in that film comes from a high-tech, underwater kingdom that's based on ancient Mesoamerican cultures.

RAMONDA: Who are you?!

NAMOR: I have many names. My people call me Kukulkan. But my enemies call me Namor.

Grace Dillon is a professor of indigenous nations studies at Portland State University. Her heritage goes back to the Anishinaabe tribes along the Great Lakes. She doesn't think a movie like Wakanda Forever can count as an indigenous futurism.

GRACE: It's not indigenous futurisms unless it is told by native people, produced by native people. That's the first really important feature is that indigenous futurisms are not written by allies.

Grace is an expert on this subject since she coined the term indigenous futurisms in the early 2000s. It started when her friend, the late novelist Ursula le Guin, encouraged her to become more of an advocate.

GRACE: She was the one that actually really encouraged me because she was saying, you know, Grace, there's no voice about indigenous science fiction or indigenous writings.

The term was supposed to be a nod towards Afrofuturism. But then Grace decided to make it plural.

GRACE: I first said indigenous futurism and then quickly turned it to futurisms, largely to support our three-decade fight in The United Nations to be called indigenous peoples with an s rather than just indigenous people.

Grace also wanted the term to be a beacon for indigenous writers who might stay away from science fiction because the genre in the U.S. evolved from Westerns, where the cowboys and Indians were reimaged as white space explorers and hostile aliens.

GRACE: There was such stereotypical and horrible depictions in science fiction about native peoples, that there were a lot of native and indigenous writers that would just stay away from that. You know, it was such a subtler, colonial kind of medium, that that was hard to get over.

Some indigenous futurisms have tropes that I think of as futuristic, but I've noticed a lot of these stories are more like magic realism, where there's an element of surrealism to the real world, or there's a folding over of time between past, present and future.

For instance, the show Reservation Dogs has gotten massive critical acclaim. The main characters are teenagers on a modern-day reservation in Oklahoma. It's pretty grounded in the real world, except spirits and folklore characters appear sometimes, but they're treated in a very matter-of-fact way. Like in this scene, the spirit of a warrior who died in the 19th century is trying to give advice to a teenage kid named Bear, whether he wants it or not.

BEAR: What are you doing here?

SPIRIT: What are you doing here?

BEAR: Elora's grandmother's dying.

SPIRIT: Oh, I know, I know, that's why I'm here. I got to take her to orientation. But what are you doing here?

BEAR: I have to be here for my friend.

SPIRIT: Aho! Young warrior! That's good. You're here for your friend. That's good. Does she know that?

BEAR: I mean I assume so. I'm here.

SPIRIT: Ah yes! That old Indian saying, I'm here, that should be good enough, you should know exactly how I feel without me even saying anything.

BEAR: <scoffs>

Danis Goulet is a Cree Métis filmmaker based in Canada. She directed that episode, which actually has two different spirit characters in it. And when she first read the script.

DANIS: Like I don't even think I blinked on, uh, like in reading that. Like it doesn't even, um, strike me as separate from the stuff that is happening, you know, to the people that are still alive. Um, and I think the show deals with especially the spirit, um, that keeps returning to Bear, the character, to like, give him advice and things like that, is definitely playing with the trope of like, sort of like the spirit helper that is always treated in Hollywood in a very earnest way. And then, you know, the flute starts to play, and the eagle starts to come out. And, and us in the indigenous community, of course, have been making fun of this stuff for years. And so now Sterlin Harjo the show's creator is like making fun of it for real in his show and subverting that trope and yet the spirit helper, there's something legitimate in, you know, the advice that's needed and also in having these relationships to our ancestors, which is something in our community that's held in a very high regard.

Grace Dillon says the way Reservation Dogs presents religious or folklore characters as just being part of life, might be difficult for non-native audiences to understand. But she's okay with that.

GRACE: What you're doing is you are playing your truths and your strengths knowing that there are certain audiences that are going to back away and become more comfortable with just viewing it as magical or superstition or, in another words, not real.

But as Grace likes to point out, they're indigenous peoples not people with a single belief system.

Stephen Graham-Jones is a member of the Blackfoot Nation, and a professor at the University of Colorado Boulder. He writes a lot of speculative fiction in novels, short stories and comic books. He says at speaking events, non-native people sometimes ask him about the connection between indigenous religions and supernatural stories.

STEPHEN: They're basically saying because, or if you subscribe to these things we call myths, which is an insult in itself, does that mean that you're more open to reality being the kind of plastic it needs to be for science fiction, fantasy and horror, you know? The reason that I find it kind of an awkward question is because it presupposes things about the writer, you know, the person that they're asking the questions of, they're, they're saying, because you are American Indian, you automatically subscribe to this belief system or that belief system or whatever.

In fact, he likes to work in more conventional genres like science fiction and horror, so he can put indigenous characters in the forefront.

STEPHEN: I feel like it's a way of centering us instead of marginalizing us, if that makes sense. Not necessarily, I mean, to me it's not necessarily about story patterns. It's not necessarily about our presence in a made-up future or anything like that. The fact that, um, that we're still around putting words on paper, telling stories, telling jokes, that itself to me is an act of resistance, you know, and to me, that's kind at the core of what indigenous futurisms is. It's, it's not letting someone else tell stories, which are probably going to be informed by some colonial myth making apparatus, you know, that wants to steamroll us and get rid of us. Um, we're, we're standing up and using our voice and making people laugh, making people cry, making people scared.

In talking with these creators, I wanted to know how indigenous futurisms are expressed differently in different media? What different kinds of stories can they tell in film versus literature or visual arts? And why is it important to work in speculative fiction instead of realistic fiction?

There's a lot more coming up after this.

BREAK

As an artistic movement, indigenous futurisms were building fairly slowly until about five years ago. And many of the people I talked with said the game changing moment didn't come from an indigenous creator. It happened when Jordan Peele's film *Get Out* became a huge box office success in 2017. Danis Goulet saw an immediate shift in the film industry.

DANIS: And I know that when the movie *Get Out* came out into the world, I feel like it just opened up creative possibilities for so many other communities to talk about our lived experience, but in a way that could be really even just like fun or, you know, just more open or inviting.

Danis had already been exploring indigenous futurisms with her 2013 short film, which is called *Wakening*. The story takes place in a futuristic, dystopian Toronto.

DANIS: I had the idea actually to tell a story about classic Cree characters from the oral storytelling tradition, and in my culture, they're referred to as *Wesakechak* and *Weetigo*, and one is a trickster and the other is cannibalistic being, and as soon as you're dealing with supernatural characters, you're kind of in a sort of fantasy genre. But I also thought that they were always treated as though they were things of the past, like relics or like quaint folkloric characters. And I wanted to sort of, um, introduce them as characters that had gravity and presence.

In her film, the character of *Wesakechak* is portrayed as a lone commando. She liberates hostages in an abandoned theater as they're being hunted by *Weetigo*, who's portrayed as a mysterious hybrid animal who speaks in the Cree language.

WEETIGO: <Speaks Cree>

WESAKECHAK: I have journeyed far to see you Weetigo. Long ago, your hunger was feared through the land. But no more.

WEETIGO: <Speaks Cree>

WESAKECHAK: The occupiers, they tricked you, Weetigo. This is no palace. This is your prison.

In 2021, Danis expanded on these themes in a feature film called *Night Raiders*, which had the largest budget for any indigenous film in Canadian history.

Her goal for *Night Raiders* was to use science fiction to explore the impact of real history -- the residential school systems in Canada. For over a hundred years, going all the way up to the 1990s, the Canadian government removed indigenous

children from their families and forced them to attend schools which indoctrinated them into white culture, often using brutal methods.

In Night Raiders, a version of these schools exists in a dystopian North America.

IDA: You have a child at the academy?

NISKA: She was taken in the Fall.

DANIS: You know, with Night Raiders, it's like, I, I just on a very basic level wanted to explore that impact and to show that in a way that presented a fresh entry point into the material because it is so heavy, and it is so hard to contend with. So, with the future system allowed for, or the future setting, it allowed for us to kind of be in a new space at which to look at this all from. And then also on the world building side, like that part was really fun and exciting and it's like I created, um, a timeline that went sort of 35 years into the future and it projected the outcome of every election, you know, the U.S. election and it like imagined a far right uprising that would lead to a civil war in North America and that the movie was set in a post-civil war period, like all those world building elements and working with the VFX teams to kind of like, you know, create the moments where you get a sense of the outside world was really exciting.

She also enjoyed playing with sci-fi tropes in a new way. Like in this futuristic society, there are swarms of flying drones.

DANIS: And in the Cree language, um, there's an embedded system of things that are referred to in the language as animate or inanimate. Very simply, in the language, rocks are referred to as animate, so you refer to them as a living thing. And I found that conceptually really interesting and also that drones are actually made of rocks and minerals, so how might we regard drones or artificial robots and computers and things like that?

And so, one of her characters has an innate understanding of drones. She can speak to them and understand them telepathically.

DANIS: Some folks might watch Night Raiders and sort of feel like one of the characters has kind of like, sort of magical powers or like maybe there's a magical realism element, but I don't, I wouldn't actually frame it that way at all. I think she is a communicator in the same way that my family, many people in my family who grew, grew up on the land who are trappers and hunters, including my Dad, um, know how to call animals. And I think that if you can call to an animal, you could also call to an A.I. being in a way. So

that mode of communication to me wasn't magic. It's a very, um, cool skillset that someone has.

WASEESE: Forward

SFX: DRONES FLY

WASEESE: Down.

SFX: DRONES FLY

And the genre of the post-apocalyptic films takes on a different perspective with indigenous people because in real life, the present day is their post-apocalyptic future.

DANIS: I found that idea in sort of like when I did research into indigenous futurism, this idea that we've already survived the apocalypse really interesting because I think it gives, um, you know, indigenous artists like a different way of coming at the apocalypse. And I think, you know, in a colonial mindset, you're fearing, you know, the invasion, whether it's like the alien invasion or you know, the impending apocalypse or whatever doom is going to happen. But from an indigenous perspective, if that doom has already happened, then you know, you might think that we are better equipped to deal with that when it happens. And, you know, in terms of like climate catastrophe, you know, it's like what can we look at from indigenous worldviews and values that could help us in the situation that we all find ourselves in, whether we're indigenous or not.

The climate crisis comes up in a lot of indigenous futurisms, like in the novel *The Bird is Gone* by Stephen Graham Jones.

In the story, Congress passes a law to protect endangered species in the Great Plains and unintentionally gives the land back to the tribes who were there first – creating a sovereign nation within the borders of the United States. After that:

STEPHEN: All the natives in America dive to the Great Plains, which is kind of weird in itself because not everybody is a Plains Indian, you know. But each chapter pretty much starts with authenticity. How, how do you decide who is Indian?

This is a big issue in real life. There have been a lot of instances of people claiming to have indigenous ancestry but they're either frauds, or they believed family stories that turned out to be false. Or if their indigenous heritage is a small percentage of their DNA, there's a debate whether to accept these people into tribal communities. In fact, different tribes have different levels of quote, blood quantum, a person needs to be accepted into the tribe — which is controversial

as well because the origin of blood quantum laws goes back to the U.S. government

Stephen thinks this is a very rich topic to explore in fiction.

STEPHEN: We can't go by blood quantum, there's, and we, it seems like every, um, method or means we use to establish who we are is in some way flawed. You know, I mean, I prefer the community acceptance way, you know, if your community accepts you, you're Indian, that that it doesn't matter about blood or language or any of that. That was something that I was trying to come at head on in *The Bird Is Gone*.

It's also a theme in his 2016 novel *Mongrels*.

STEPHEN: *Mongrels* is, um, family of werewolves trying to make it in the southeast of America. They live down there because there's no snow, so their footprints won't lead back to their front door, so the villagers won't come massacre them. In this world of mongrels the issues these, um, marginalized werewolves keep facing in their daily existence, which is, they're not battling vampires, they're not like fighting Nazis, none of that. They're just trying to pass the loan application down at the used car lot. They're trying to make rent that month and it keeps on not happening, they're all native issues to me.

His inspiration for *Mongrels* actually came from reading and teaching the graphic novel *Maus* by Art Spiegelman. In that comic book, Spiegelman tells the story of Holocaust survivors using animals instead of people. So, the Jews are depicted as mice, the Germans are cats, the French are frogs. Native Americans don't appear in the story, but Stephen wondered if Spiegelman would've been drawn as wolves since that's how so many non-native people imagine them.

STEPHEN: That's just like every truck stop in America, which you've seen of course, where all the blankets and t-shirts are half of a, you know, noble Indian and the other half is a wolf face. You know that kind of stuff.

Yeah. Tell me a bit more about the metaphor of the werewolf. How did you have fun with kind of the, the lore and genre of a werewolf story and making that a story of indigenous futurism?

STEPHEN: I guess first of all, you, you can't get bitten. You can't get infected into being a werewolf in my version of it, you have to be born with the blood, you know, which hopefully that doesn't mean I'm arguing blood quantum, but, um, there's a hurricane going on in this little family of werewolves in their human form are in a store trying to stock up so they can ride this storm out. And the sister, it's a sister, a brother, and then

their nephew. And the sister is going after her brother because he was dating a blonde woman. And she's wondering what kind of werewolf is she going to turn into? Like a golden retriever werewolf and that that's not going to be right. What was she's doing is she's expressing the same racism that you see a lot in Indian country. Um, both of people who aren't Indian and also of anyone who marries outside of Indian America, you know. It's considered, it can be considered like watering your blood down or not helping promote your people and all that stuff, and there's a lot of that in Mongrels for sure. A lot of worrying about who is the most werewolf, you know? And how do you, how do you be the most werewolf?

Stephen says when it comes to indigenous futurisms in the publishing industry, there were a lot of similarities to what happened with *Get Out* in the film industry. In the last several years, Black writers have found success using speculative fiction to explore systemic racism, and that opened the door for genre writers in other marginalized communities.

The first novel of indigenous futurism to become a big commercial hit was Rebecca Roanhorse's book *Trail of Lightning* in 2018. It was about an indigenous woman who slays monsters in a dystopian future.

STEPHEN: That book went straight to the reader. It didn't slow down to say, I'm going to wait for permission, I'm going to wait for validation. I'm going to wait for people to say, um, this is good. It just went straight to the readers, and everybody started reading it. And I think that's how we should do it. We should never wait for permission to run out on the narrow branches. We should just go there thinking it's going to hold us. You know? ***Well, what do you mean by, um, running out on the narrow branches?***

STEPHEN: I think that the marketplace or the critical establishment, or both in tandem, not really consciously want to keep, um, native writers close to the trunk of literature, as I would, as I think about it, like if literature is a tree, then close to the trunk is where the realist fiction is, the stories that don't require werewolves or spaceships or any of that, but out on the branches are where the variables have been introduced -- the fantastic stuff, the werewolves, the spaceships, the zombies. And I feel like so many of us now, we're tired of telling those realist stories or maybe we never did it in the first place, really. This genre stuff isn't just idol entertainment, it's actually in dialogue with the world, you know? And I think we are in a good moment for that, and hopefully this moment is sustained. That's, that's my dream.

There's also been an influx of indigenous futurisms in the world of fine arts. And there's one visual artist whose work I can't stop thinking about: Virgil Ortiz.

Virgil works in 2D mediums like photography and digital compositions. But he's best known for creating pottery, sculptures and costumes. All of his work ties back to an original science fiction story he created called Revolt 1680/2180.

Virgil is part of the Cochiti Pueblo community. In 1680, there was a rebellion against Spanish occupation, and they managed to keep the Spanish out of New Mexico over a decade. So, in his storyline, Cochiti Pueblo people from the 22nd century travel back in time to that uprising in the 17th century.

Virgil came up with this premise when he was a teenager. He's never wavered from it. Every work of art he creates is part of that worldbuilding, although he says clay is the material he feels the most connected to because it's been a storytelling tool in his community for a long time.

VIRGIL: So, um, it turns out that I made up my mind when I was 15 to dedicate my life to clay, to capture a timeline in history, what our people did in the 1800s of all the people that were coming into our area, they made caricatures of them in clay and that's how they documented a timeline. So, I was like, that fits in perfectly with what, um, I feel I was, I was born to do here on this, um, this timeline and this dimension.

I was curious to talk with him about the costumes he creates for his time traveling characters. The costumes are worn by models in his digital compositions, and they've been displayed in art galleries. The costumes look like they could be in a Marvel movie, with spiked helmets and weapons, zigzagging cyberpunk patterns, and Matrix-like coats.

VIRGIL: Yeah, I feel it's, I'm very lucky to be able to work in different mediums and I try to learn every medium that I can and get my hands on and all of it turns into, um, tools to help me tell the story and to really like learn how to do Photoshop. And of course, I can't go to like Party City or Halloween Spirit Store to buy either costumes because they never existed. So, you know, I turned to, um, YouTube to learn how to foam fabricate, um, the costumes. I learned how to sew, first of all just for fashion because I couldn't afford the fashions that I'd seen in magazines. But, um, now to create costumes from them and understand the whole, um, idea of designing costuming and like the whole, you know, a stage or a scene in a movie, um, all of these different types of mediums help me do it.

He's got a team of 5 to 20 people working for him, depending on the scale of each piece. Although his creative process relies very much on gut instinct.

VIRGIL: It might be ancestral memory because that works, I mean that reflects back to my, my clay works is because like, uh, uh, Cochiti colors are, um, black, white, and red. So, we have a very limited color, um, palette. And to be able to use black and white and spot coloring red it, it's timeless. So, whether if you look at something that our people made from the late 1800s, it still looks brand new, it looks futuristic.

Well, tell me the story of, um, 1680/2180. What's the premise of the story? Like what, you know, gimme the, the, as I say in Hollywood, gimme the elevator pitch.

VIRGIL: Right! <laugh>. I know we're still working on that, so I don't know if I can talk about it too much, but, um, because I'm moving to Los Angeles here in, um, in December or January to, to do that exactly.

Oh wow.

VIRGIL: But a lot of the characters, um, that are in my script are such as like the aeronauts or the recon watchmen, they're coming back from 2180 to present time or historic times. And what they're doing is to collect, um, shards of pottery, our designs, our songs, our ceremonies, um, take them back to 2180, store them, protect them so that when we get to that timeline, everything is still intact, we still have all our traditions going on.

I usually think of fine arts and pop culture as being opposite ends of a cultural spectrum. But Virgil doesn't see it that way. He's on a mission, moving from one venue to another, trying to find the biggest audience possible, whether it's in a museum or a multiplex.

VIRGIL: I mean, it goes along with all the different, the, the big, um, studios like DC, Marvel, Disney, all these, uh, people that are doing now like Avengers and all that, so yeah, I can't wait, I'm going as big as I can, you know, a whole saga, like taking down the huge storyline and then breaking them down into characters, let's say as like Mandalorian or Obi Wan or, you know, all these, the, the specific, um, background of all the different characters to break them down into TV, um, streaming movies, that is all on the table now of how we're going to release everything.

He even has the molds for toys and action figures ready to go.

VIRGIL: Like I have the master molds for them, I have the ideas for them. So, when we move into a huge deal that will be coming, like I have all the master molds for everything. So, then we move into licensing.

He told me he's been doing a lot to prepare for this move to Los Angeles, from finding screenwriters to making sure his intellectual property rights are

protected. But he's also thinking about what made him fall in love with sci-fi in the first place.

VIRGIL: I remember just going back to when I was six years old, when I'd seen the first Star Wars movie, anything that was sci-fi on TV as well, like old school Star Trek or Battlestar Galactica. I immediately learned every character, where they came from, how they dressed, what kind of ships they drove, and um, it just really, I guess just the fantasy part of storytelling. I don't know, it just really stuck with me. So, I said, oh cool, I could use this type of storytelling to actually just get like the attention of the next generation's minds, and that's what prompted me to really start to develop a whole storyline about it.

That's really interesting too, because you think about like, anything you learn in history class, it's like, oh, we're going to get tested on this and then when the test is done, you forget about it. But then when it comes to sci-fi and fantasy, we have this obsessive knowledge of like, you know, we certainly know the history of if it's Star Wars, you know, or you could even quote the movies. And so, it's a kind of way of, um, of taking this kind of difficult history and, and putting it in, in the guise of something that people generally are pretty obsessive about.

VIRGIL: Right. Nobody wants to talk about the genocide that happened to our people, the bloodshed, all the, um, colonization of, um, all the Pueblo lands here in New Mexico. But if you do have a storyline, a whole, uh, feature involving, um, futurism into it, that helps a lot. And that's what I've been doing like with all my art shows, my gallery shows, my museum shows, is to introduce that whole storyline. And that was my prayer to begin with, was to have people talk about our history using art.

Everyone I spoke with talked about indigenous futurisms as a way to express their ideas and find a larger audience. But I think indigenous futurisms are also good for the genre as a whole. Fantasy worlds can be anything we want them, but the big companies keep rehashing the same ideas, which can lead to creative staleness. As a fan of fantasy genres, a shift in perspective can bring me into a world that I had never imagined, and it can make the world around me seem like a place I've never seen before.

That's it for this week, thank you for listening. Special thanks to Virgil Ortiz, Grace Dillon, Danis Goulet, and Stephen Graham-Jones – who has one more thing to add about indigenous futurisms.

STEPHEN: With indigenous futurisms. I'm so happy for, um, spell check because I can never spell indigenous right the first time. <laugh>.

<laughs> Me too, actually, me too, yeah.

STEPHEN: Used to, we were all just Indian and I can spell Indian and then we were, then, we were all native for a while. And I can spell native, but indigenous man that takes like all my fingers and most...

It's the E and the I. I always, I always forget where the E and the I go.

STEPHEN: Yeah.

I always forget if the E or the I goes in the middle.

STEPHEN: Me too, me too.

<laugh>

Also, thanks to all the listeners who suggested this topic over the years, mostly recently, Benjamin Schultz-Figueroa.

My assistant producer is Stephanie Billman. You can follow the show on Twitter, Facebook and Instagram, where I put a slideshow of Virgil Ortiz's artwork.

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