

**Grace Dillon**  
(transcript)

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&

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[pause]

**00:30 Speaker 1:** So let me read you a tiny bit of her amazing bio. Grace Dillon, PhD, Anishinaabe, is a Professor in the Indigenous Nations Studies Program at Portland State University in Portland, Oregon, where she teaches undergraduate and graduate courses on a range of interests including Native American and Indigenous studies, science fiction, Indigenous cinema, popular culture, race and social justice, and early modern literature. She is the editor of "Walking the Clouds: An Anthology of Indigenous Science Fiction", from the University of Arizona Press, 2012. And "Hive of Dreams: Contemporary Science Fiction from the Pacific Northwest", that's from Oregon State University Press, 2003. Her work appears in diverse journals including The Journal of Science Fiction Film and Television; Foundation: The International Review of Science Fiction; Extrapolation; The Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts... I didn't know about all... These are all amazing things, I like them. The Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television; Science Fiction Studies; and Renaissance Papers. Thank you, let's put our hands together.

[applause]

**01:44 Grace Dillon:** And I left out all the books and the book chapters and stuff like that. But there have been exciting things going on, let me tell you. And I am so humbled, I have to say, thank you so much Skawennati and Jason for inviting me. For Uvi, who gave such wonderful directions, and let us know when we could have food, [laughter] what time. And I'm also really humbled by the talent that I'm seeing here, and the generous, generous gifts that have been shared. I was thinking of both my college students and my grandchildren, whether they're four years old or 18, whenever you talk about physics or quantum physics, they immediately come up with Neil Degrasse, right? It's Neil now, not Carl Sagan, they have no idea who that is. [laughter] And I'm thinking, "Ooh, maybe pretty soon it'll be coyote." [laughter] That they're bringing up. So, seeing that kind of enthusiasm, I'm in specifically the field of Science Fiction. Yes, there is a field. And we are so snobbish that we don't use the term sci-fi, we use the term sf, small letters. [laughter] You don't capitalize it. [laughter] So you could always tell a snobby sf scholar, if they use the word sf. [laughter] So when I slip into that, you'll forgive me, eh?

[laughter]

**03:25 GD:** The other thing is that when I was tenure-tracked specifically in science fiction, which was a first in the States at the time, I have to really give credit to Ursula K. Le Guin. She was the one who encouraged me, wrote letters, and made sure to get a Native professor in there with science fiction. And so it's really thanks to her that she gave me the groundwork, and where to go, and how to do things. And so I really want to credit her for that as well. There's been so much excitement going on. And before, I have to tell you, very divisive debates. But it has all changed now, right Brian? [laughter] Because now you have a campus like UC Riverside, with their whole year of Sawyer Foundation, where they're basically bringing in people that are looking at Afrofuturisms, Indigenous futurisms, Chicano-Latina futurisms, Asian futurisms, [04:37]            that, Gulf futurisms, Roger Walkhurst has really been working with that.

**04:45 GD:** And, basically, in a odd kind of way, I would say, we went from being invisible, like when I first started writing articles with Nalo Hopkinson and her Taino-Arawak background, which she and I discussed together, and she'd be throwing in Anishinaabe stories where we'd go, "Oh, oh! I grew up with that story! Where'd you find out about that?" [laughter] And way back when in about

2002-2003 or so, a lot of times it would be questioned that Natives or Indigenous peoples even wrote sf. [laughter] And as all of us have been saying here, and I'm so... You guys, you can't believe how happy I am to hear an amazing consistency here, [laughter] that I never hear in other places, which is that we have been doing sf forever. [laughter] It's been in our blood, right? It's been Mushkiki, it's been medicine. Our stories are medicine, healing. And it's very much connected to a recognition now of Indigenous Science, or sometimes I'll say Indigenous sciences, because as Colin Milburn pointed out, a brilliant professor from UC Davis, as he pointed out and gave a nice long talk after we'd had... Oh my goodness, you guys, sf academics, they get into fights.

[laughter]

**06:39 GD:** I was actually in line with Fredric Jameson, Freddie, postmodern guy, right? And literally, the fists came out and they were punching each other, [laughter] over the definition of science fiction. [laughter] So just to let you know, there was even that kind of controversy going on. So, to have those that are writers of color in science fiction, which has expanded so much and so drastically, was for quite a while, very strange. And we would all be kind of sitting in the banquets, we'd be sitting in our certain tables in circles, [laughter] kind of ignored. [laughter] Because, "Whatever they are doing over there isn't really sf. Maybe it could qualify as fantasy, but I'm not sure it's sf." [laughter] And of course, it is. So my kind of path I chose to take is to say, "Eh!" [laughter] "We're here, and we've been here."

**08:00 GD:** I grew up as a little one speaking my language with my family, and so for me, reading stories about stars and animate stars and star visitors, [laughter] and going off to stars, was just like growing up. [laughter] It was all a part of who we are and who we were. And as I grew up, because I lived in the woods as a Native person, where we moved a lot of times, there were a lot of places where we didn't have plumbing, and we had either the outhouse or the woods, [laughter] depending on how cold it was usually, because it could get 50 degrees below zero. [laughter] That's when you wanted the outhouse, eh? [laughter] But coming out of that kind of area, and headed into California, Hollywood, California, I'm so excited, Loretta, that you're working with television. I had never seen television. [laughter] I hadn't seen films, I hadn't been around any of the stuff. The first musical group that I met and listened to was Red Hot Chili Peppers. [laughter] I didn't know about The Beatles, [laughter] or Wizard of Oz, [laughter] or all the things that people are just supposed to grow up knowing. [laughter]

**09:37 GD:** So, I came in with very strange ideas that professors tried to knock out of my head. One, that we Indians are writers and readers, and that we've had written languages pre-contact. They were shocked at this, "Where'd you get that information from?" [laughter] "I grew up with it." [laughter] "We used birch bark." I was just like, "I have to prove myself?" [laughter] "We've got the stories to prove that." Right? So, as you will see, I'm gonna break all boundaries here, instead of a PowerPoint, I'm gonna actually pass out books. [laughter] And in this case, books that are fairly recent, connected to Indigenous futurisms, since a lot of you may be familiar with a number of them and have read them already. So I kind of wanted to bring out the latest and pass them around so you can actually look at them. And I'll give you just a little blurb here, first. Oh, how many of you have been watching the Cleverman series?

[laughter]

**11:00 S?:** That's a zero, eh?

**11:02 GD:** Please check it out. [laughter] It's actually available outside of Australia. Cleverman series, it is the best. And so I'm all for television, check it out. You can download it, downstream it really easily, they just did their first season, it's an excellent depiction and combination of Indigenous Science just being quietly worked in, along with superpowers, of course. [laughter]

**11:40 GD:** Well, I have and I would be happy for anyone who is interested, I'm writing an archival piece for Science Fiction Film and Television, that is kind of a compilation of Indigenous Science Fiction cinema. And there's quite a bit out there, and this is all single-spaced, and that gives you an idea of how many there are. And I'll be happy to email you a copy of that, if you're interested. And Skye & Chang is in there. [chuckle] I have a section for television, too. Of course, your work as well, Skawennati. And so many others that have come up, and are available, or are just about to come out. Zainab, for instance, is working with Alien Night and has been working with that for a little while, but it should come out very soon.

**12:49 GD:** Oh, I'm going to skip all of my Anishinaabemowin, which I was gonna start off with. It will take the 20 minutes, and so I'm just gonna skip that. [laughter] But I do wanna mention this though...

[foreign language]

**13:07 GD:** Oh, and I use the [13:08]        dialect, just to let you know. That's a specific dialect of Anishinaabe which has not yet been written down. My daughter and I, and great uncles and all kinds of people are trying to get it transcribed into print. It means designs made of glowing light, designs made of glowing light. And I actually see that not only for the amazing work that you're doing, Camille, not only... It's beyond performance, [chuckle] but it is an embodied consciousness. In Indigenous futurisms, there is an embodied consciousness with whatever you are doing. It's not just simply a story that you read, sat down and say, "Well, that was a nice escapist moment." [laughter] You're reading carefully between the lines, sometimes to figure out specifically the kind of Indigenous scientific literacies that are being used, what kinds of Mushkiki, what kinds of medicine are being used, what plants are being grown, how can you use them in certain circumstances? And all of the writers that I work with in the sf field are very, very careful. There is no Pan-Indian Science, so I'm really glad, Loretta, that you brought that up, because that's a really important issue. Rather they write stories with characters that are specific in certain places, and then you'll learn of those plants and that Mushkiki or medicine, or those kind of ways of food sovereignty that can employed quietly as a part of it.

**15:00 GD:** There's also, and again I picked up on that, where you were mentioning Indigenous Science and Western Science, and I will love the day when we drop the term Western in front of science, but for right now, [laughter] the fights that we are having, I'm trying to change every talk here in your journal in our field like Extrapolation, Science Fiction Studies Foundation in Britain, the Journal of Fantastic in the Arts, to have as part of their mission statements that they welcome scholarship that is writing on forms. I would love to say Indigenous Science or other kinds of forms, but they have slipped into the Non-Western, right? [laughter] Non-Western Science. And it was hilarious, because a friend of mine called me and she's like, "Oh, Grace, Grace! You're not gonna believe this. We did it! We did it!" I said, "You got Indigenous Science into the mission statement?" She said, "Well, no, no, we're still working on that. But now we have Non-Western Science." [laughter] I'm saying this to you guys as those that are involved in, I think, either in Indigenous

Nations Studies, or strongly are connected to Indigenous communities, where these kind of conversations don't go on to that kind of degree, right? [laughter] The stone was our first storyteller, and I wanted to go back, David, to your amazing talk about the meteorite. And it just flipped back into my mind that that's what I grew up with, is knowing that it was the stone that was the first storyteller.

[foreign language]

**16:49 GD:** Stories are animate, stories are alive. And stories change, and they change like a rock, in sedimentary, igneous, and metamorphic ways. Sometimes the stories are burdened by the ghosts for future generations, or even of future generations. [17:13]        to live is to experience motion, always moving. And I think of a flux that just even exists at the Brownian level, right? [chuckle] Where everything is in movement. And we Natives have recognized that, and talked about it in that kind of way. Now you can read an Oxford scientist like Richard L. Jones and his soft machines, where he will actually make a point of going into great detail of how everything is in motion. And we got into a snatch of a conversation there of, "Can we go down below the ones and the zeroes?" [chuckle] "Get away from that false binary and get to the deeper depth, somehow, that captures the reality of life, the animate quality, the fact that we are always in motion?" And I would say that some of you are doing it already, from what I've been reading.

[foreign language]

**18:24 GD:** Listen all of you.

[foreign language]

**18:30 GD:** Where there is a place of love.

[foreign language]

**18:36 GD:** We dream far in all directions. And with that in mind, let me just quickly give you... Gregory Cajete has revised his ideas on Native Science, that has become so famous. And in his latest book, has anyone had a chance to look at that? Oh, hey, I think I've got it. See? This is where I'm supposed to start passing out stuff. [laughter] "Indigenous Community: Rekindling the Teachings of the Seventh Fire". There are actually several chapters in here on Indigenous Science. And he brings it about so succinctly, that I thought I will just pull out just a couple of features there. Gregory Cajete taking a look at Tewa consciousness living as he does in the Santa Pueblo community, gives the notion of restoring, restorying, I should say, like a story, restorying, is how communities break free from dysfunction, become creative, and start building a sustainable future. I don't know how many of you guys now are stuck with the platitudes or the buzzwords of, "Sustainability!" [laughter] For our campus, that's the top platform, right?

**20:11 GD:** Sustainability, we engage in sustainability at our campus. And I said, "Alright, if you engage in sustainability, then you've gotta engage in Indigenous Science." And first, of course, the reaction was, "Does that exist?" [laughter] "What is that?" [laughter] But we have been very fortunate that as we formed our School of Gender, Race and Nations, our Indigenous Nation Studies program is separate, our Black Studies program is separate in the department. Woman, Gender and Sexuality is a department separately. Chicano-Latina studies is a program. I see a few shocked

faces, because, yes, this doesn't usually happen. [laughter] So we get to be in a building together, we get to have separate budgets, but we get to have actual scholactivist conversations, and bring in people that cross into those areas. And how about that? I have ended up bringing... There's a number of black Indian writers, who have just come out with some new novels coming out this year. Some of them aren't quite out yet, but I'll show you the galleys. [laughter] And it shows a really nice crossover with what is going on there.

**21:41 GD:** Indigenous education, rather than the information processing approach usually observed in modern schooling, is the process of coming to know, honor and apply essential principles of ecological relationship in its broadest terms. This way of education honors educational experiences that do not revolve around abstractions. Now for us academics, right? We were totally thrown out of our element. [laughter] "Wait a minute, protect the abstractions!" [laughter] Although I do have to say, and I'm very, very glad to see this, and when I review articles, if sometimes the language becomes that theoretical spin around, where you're not really saying anything, but you know that you've put in the right jargon. I'll kind of slice into that stuff and say, "You know," [laughter] "this is what you're really saying here in this article. So please tell us that."

**22:49 GD:** And it's around people, community, relationships and nature. It moves beyond mere cognitive rationalism. Now this, you guys, is very important for sf, or science fiction, because a lot of it has been based on Darko Suvin, his concept of cognitive estrangement. As if for sf when you're speaking about science, you're speaking about something that if you're gonna make it weird, and strange, and bizarre, and interesting but kind of true, it remains somehow just at the cognitive level. Well, our whole field has shifted at this point, because of our afrofuturisms and Indigenous futurisms and others, that actually question that. We, as people, are a lot more than just our cognitive being, right?

**23:46 GD:** And the binary, Dave, that you were bringing up, the kind of contention that comes up between science and being sacred, right? And sacred as if they're somehow always very, very separate. What's really, really cool, and Camille, what you were already showing us with your works, and Loretta Todd, what you were doing, with Coyote Science, when you were talking about how when we have songs, and we have dance. Already that is illustrating that science, and the sacred is not some kind of false binary in contradiction in and of itself, right? So actually, what's really happened for writers like Nnedi Okorafor, "Who Fears Death", where Wanuri's going to be actually directing the film that will be coming out. She has a dragon in that novel, and she shape shifts into a dragon, or a vulture, or a crow, or I'll let you decide.

[laughter]

**25:00 GD:** Because she shapeshifts quite a bit. [chuckle] Well, even her students, when she was first teaching that novel, what? Back in 2010-2011, were questioning. And since pot has already been referenced, and it is legal in Oregon, so come visit us. [laughter] Her student said, "Were you smoking pot when you were writing that?" [laughter] That was their initial reaction to it being science in any kind of way. And what she said was really crazy about this, because she is from Chicago, the University of Chicago, and she had drawn in a lot of African American students, a lot of students of color, and it was fascinating, she said, she just assumed that they'd be right with her, and they weren't. And it was as if they couldn't quite get around the... This is fantasy. So, of course, I had to assign the novel, [chuckle] and see what happened. And it was very fascinating, there were only one or two holdouts, remember, Portland's strangely liberal weird, so Portland's like, "Ooh,

ooh, ooh! Is that strange and weird? Okay!" [laughter] "I may not believe it, but I will now accept it." [laughter] So there was only one or two holdouts, computer programmers that were just like, "Uh-huh." [laughter]

**26:35 GD:** But futurisms is just that, bringing together both, right? Science for us is not only the observing and the experiencing and learning from those experiences, it's also put and infused in our songs, in our dances and in our ceremonies, and that's where they're really, really embedded. So these writers embed in their own stories in a quiet kind of way. I'm gonna quit with the rest, [laughter] but you need to get these.

**27:18 S1:** Well, actually Grace, I think we're running out of time.

**27:23 GD:** Oh my gosh! Okay, can I just pass around books real fast?

**27:27 S1:** I wanted to suggest that perhaps, could we pass out the books during the VR demo, when people are doing a lot of waiting around?

**27:34 GD:** Absolutely!

**27:35 S1:** Okay.

**27:35 GD:** Absolutely.

**27:36 S1:** Okay?

**27:36 GD:** Yeah, totally.

**27:38 S1:** That cool?

**27:38 GD:** Yeah. [chuckle] And what I'll do, you guys, is be happy to explain to you any of the features. These are actually, a lot of them are galleys that I'm writing forwards for, or doing blurbs for, and they're all coming this year. Okay. [laughter]

[applause]

**28:05 S1:** Do we have any questions? Alright.

**28:19 S?:** [28:19]       . I just wanted to make a comment because in our community, they're taking a look at bringing culture back into curriculum, and embedding it into curriculum. So I'm really happy to see that in the higher levels of scholarship, that they're bringing that to the forefront. And I'd like to congratulate you on that.

**28:47 GD:** I mean to me, we just feel really blessed. Judy BlueHorse Skelton, who's Nez Perce and Cherokee at our campus, she not only takes students out to refurbish like veteran hospitals, but she also takes them out to more sacred areas with the Camas bulbs, and they seed and replant it, and do that sort of thing. She also knows all of the flora and fauna of the Columbia Gorge, which is so rare that they don't appear anywhere else. And she gives them the Nez Perce feelings of it, so that through the parts, of knowing the parts, which we do in our language, right? Then you know what

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you can use for medicine, what you might wanna avoid, and how you wanna boil that for a long time. [laughter] Thank you.

[pause]