

Scene on Radio

Season 5, Episode 11: Change Everything

Transcript

[Music]

John Biewen: *Season 5 is made possible in part by listeners who've supported our show, and by a grant from the International Women's Media Foundation.*

John Biewen: When it comes to *big* changes in societies, you know, the kind that shift epochs? Most of us go about our lives assuming they won't happen.

Amy Westervelt: I think that's true. But they do happen. Not often, of course, by definition – we don't have a new epoch every year or two. But for lots of reasons, it feels very likely that we're on the edge of dramatic change, one way or another. Just think about what Max Berger said in our last episode, about politics in the U.S.

Max Berger: If you just sort of step back and look at the U.S. as a country, it would be very clear, you know, the current constitutional arrangement is not long for this world.

John Biewen: We are in real danger of tipping into full-fledged one-party rule and possibly fascist authoritarianism. One of our two major political parties is more or less united in trying to take us there. But at the same time, it seems like there's energy building on the other side unlike anything we've seen in a long time, people demanding radical change in the direction of *more* democracy and a much more just and equal society. It feels like, politically, the U.S. is just, like, on a knife's edge.

Amy Westervelt: The other freight train coming through the tunnel, with even more inevitability, is the climate emergency. The way I think about it: we can either have planned change or an ambush, but the change part, that's inevitable.

John Biewen: On this question of change, there's a remark that makes the rounds from time to time, from the writer Ursula K. Le Guin. She said it in a speech in 2014 when she was receiving a medal from the National Book Foundation. Ms. Le Guin was talking about art and the marketplace and, therefore, capitalism.

Ursula K. Le Guin: We live in capitalism. Its power seems inescapable. So did the divine right of kings. [Audience laughter, applause.] Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings.

Amy Westervelt: Let's say it louder for the people at the back: Any human power can be resisted and changed by human beings.

[Music: Theme]

John Biewen: From the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University, this is Scene on Radio, Season 5: The Repair. Our conclusion, Episode 11. I'm John Biewen.

Amy Westervelt: I'm Amy Westervelt.

John Biewen: We started this season by exploring the climate emergency as a cultural problem. With the help of historians and other scholars, we told a 2500-year story of how we got here. How the West evolved into the dominating, extractive society that — among other gigantic crimes — drove the world to the edge of the ecological abyss.

Amy Westervelt: Last episode we looked at policies we need to pursue in the short term — like, *now* — to avoid the most disastrous outcomes of climate change. In this, our final episode, a different but related question: How do we need to change as a people, as a society, a collection of societies? What's the *cultural* transformation we need to make to live in good health with the rest of the natural world, and with each other.

John Biewen: And there's that "we" again. For our purposes right now, the "we" we're talking about most is those of us who live in the societies that created the problem. The

West, the Global North, with particular focus on the United States — because we are a U.S.- based podcast, after all, but also because, as we've pointed out here, the U.S. is the #1 climate culprit.

Amy Westervelt: You know, I can almost hear some folks scoffing. “Cultural transformation.” In your dreams! That’s gonna take too long.

John Biewen: Yeah.

Amy Westervelt: I think one reason for that kind of skepticism is that the people with the most power have succeeded in convincing us — brainwashing us — into thinking our society is structured in a way that’s consistent with human nature. Individualism, self-centeredness, a focus on my personal short-term gain at the expense of future generations or other living things. ‘It may not be pretty all the time but that’s just who we are as humans.’

John Biewen: Right. So any attempt to engineer a different sort of society, based on, say, cooperation and caring, is doomed to fail. It's unnatural, not to mention un-American. We've discussed that prevailing neoliberal take before on Scene on Radio. But what if *that* is all wrong? What if we could make a cultural shift that represents a *return* to ways of being that are *less* contradictory, *less* forced, and more in harmony with who we are as human critters than the ways we're living now?

[Music]

Amy Westervelt: OK, John, this is highfalutin' talk. We risk sounding like we've got our heads in the clouds. How do we come back to earth, and put flesh on these bones, to mix metaphors? Where do we start in imagining this massive transformation?

John Biewen: Well, people who listen to Scene on Radio will have noticed we tend to follow the money. How'd we get white supremacy? Well, it's a labor story. Patriarchy? It's about domination and control.

Amy Westervelt: And of course that's also about money.

John Biewen: What distorts and hobbles our democracy? Follow the money. Oftentimes when people talk about culture, we're thinking art, language, food, spirituality, anything but money or economics. But culture is about values, the stuff we hold dear. And Western societies, over many centuries, built a culture that cares tremendously about money and getting more of it.

Amy Westervelt: In exploring the climate crisis here in Season 5, we've talked almost non-stop about money – how people with power and capital chose to accumulate more wealth, and at what cost. So, if we're gonna talk about a cultural shift, isn't that a good place to start: with our whole way of thinking about economics? Including what we mean by "wealth."

Dirk Philipson: So my last book was about GDP, gross domestic product, and...

John Biewen: I went to see Dirk Philipson. He studies and teaches economic history at Duke University's Sanford School of Public Policy.

Dirk Philipson: I think what is so amazing about GDP is that as far as I can tell, as a historian, it's the only metric that has ever been universal. Right? So, every country in the world, including presumably socialist countries, totalitarian countries, democratic countries, Muslim countries, follow that measure.

John Biewen: OK, Dirk says, maybe two countries don't care about their GDP, or claim not to: The totalitarian communist regime in North Korea, and Bhutan, famous for introducing Gross National Happiness.

Amy Westervelt: But yes, GDP. That go-to measure of a nation's prosperity and well-being. What does gross domestic product measure? Transactions in the so-called marketplace. The buying and selling of goods and services.

Dirk Philipsen: You know, so the minute you begin to think about this, that of course means that it also does *not* measure a whole range of things that are very important to people, from freedom to love to care to kindness. Anything that is not marketed. If my wife were to stay at home or I stayed at home caring for our kids, it would not measure that. If we both work and then have to hire people to come in to take care of our kids, it gets measured. It also measures perverse things. So it doesn't measure the tree, but when you cut it down it measures the lumber, right?

Amy Westervelt: John, you said it many episodes ago: Under capitalism, a thousand-year-old tree standing in the forest has no value until somebody takes a chainsaw to it. That was not just some groovy cultural observation. Under the sway of the West, most of the world has now embedded that value judgment into a key measure of our success, or failure, as nations. Powerful people gaze at the number and move money and policy in an effort to boost it.

CNBC, 10/28/21: Jangling music. Rick Santelli: Welcome back to Squawk Box, Rick Santelli here, with live breaking news, top tier economic releases! We're looking not only at claims, but also our first look at third quarter GDP....

Amy Westervelt: If you follow the news, you can hardly get through a day without hearing about it.

CNBC newscast, 10/28/21, Rick Santelli: In terms of GDP, 2.6 percent is what people were looking for — this is a disappointment. Up 2 percent. Only up 2 percent!

John Biewen: Few of us are immune to caring about GDP. Its performance does correlate loosely with factors that affect a lot of us: the number of jobs available, how my 401k is doing if I have one. And, therefore, politics: Is the president succeeding at his most important job – *growing the economy*? His re-election may well depend on GDP.

Amy Westervelt: The trouble is, as Dirk Philipsen points out, the hero in this economic model is the person who spends and spends — and on top of that spending, runs you off the road so his car, and yours, need expensive repairs, adding still more to GDP.

Dirk Philipsen: In other words, this is the person who generates a lot of market transactions but clearly does not contribute to our well-being. So part of the problem of GDP and how we measure economic output is that this has now, it's not just a measure, it is also a goal. Capitalism has to grow, which means in effect that capitalism will do everything it can in order to create circumstances that allow it to grow. Which means that it constantly creates artificial scarcity, that it turns every aspect of our lives into commodities that can be sold in the marketplace, including love and sex and information. Rather than just a measure, it becomes a goal, and as a goal, it is now driving us off the cliff. Demonstrably so.

[Music]

John Biewen: As you know, Amy, Dirk is one of a small but growing crowd of thinkers who've been making this central point: At the heart of the human-made ecological crisis is our addiction to economic growth.

Amy Westervelt: That's right. And these thinkers use a variety of terms and emphasize different points. Kate Raworth, a British economist, developed a concept she calls Doughnut Economics back in 2012. She's since written a book about it and given hundreds of talks, including this one at Radboud University in the Netherlands.

Kate Raworth: So let me start with this doughnut, the one doughnut in the world that actually turns out to be good for us, because I've learned that pictures are powerful....

John Biewen: Raworth visualizes her economic model as a doughnut-like ring. The ring represents the sweet spot, where we want all of humanity, and our economic activity, to live.

Kate Raworth: So that the hole in the middle is the place where people are left falling short, without the resources they need for healthcare, education, food, water, housing, energy, mobility. We want to leave nobody in the hole, get everybody over the social foundation into the doughnut. But, and this is a big but, we cannot overshoot the outer ring, the ecological ceiling, because there we begin to tip our planet out of balance with our pressure on resources. We cause climate change. We acidify the oceans, create a hole in the ozone layer, create catastrophic levels of biodiversity loss and ecosystem breakdown....

Amy Westervelt: As Raworth says, the world's economies today are failing badly in both directions. Billions of people lack the basics of a good life, and at the same time, some of us are consuming way too much and inflicting catastrophic harm on our

planet's ecosystems. Like Dirk Philipsen, Kate Raworth says we're just disastrously confused about what an economy is *for*.

John Biewen: I talked with one more thinker who's considered a leader on these questions. [Sound: Felber clearing throat] He was in a studio in Vienna on a hot summer day.

Christian Felber: Yeah. So it feels like climate change, actually.

John Biewen: Christian Felber teaches at Vienna University of Economics and Business. He's written 15 books and he gives a lot of speeches. But that's my stodgy, conventional way of introducing him. When I asked him to introduce himself, he started this way:

Christian Felber: Sure. Um, I consider myself a holistic being, part of the great interbeing....

John Biewen: He's best known for his ideas about economics, but he studied Spanish, psychology, sociology, and political science. His keen interest in ecology traces back to

a high school project studying the Amazon. Felber says with apparent pride that he's not an economist.

Christian Felber: That's just a too-small fragment of the whole. But I am an economic reformer, and at the same time a contemporary dancer and a lover of nature.

Amy Westervelt: OK, so I'm getting the idea that Christian Felber, despite being a white man with reddish hair, and [laughing] — forgive me, but he's Austrian, no less....

John Biewen: [Laughs] Yeah, we can say it, and I think Christian would take it with good humor. On the whiteness scale, one to ten, he's a 10.5, right alongside my white Midwestern behind.

Amy Westervelt: Despite that, he's questioned everything. Felber's best-known book is titled *Change Everything*.

John Biewen: Here's the subtitle: *Creating an Economy for the Common Good*. [Music] That's his phrase. It's similar in spirit to the Wellbeing Economy that Dirk Philipsen

advocates, and Felber shares a lot of perspectives with Kate Raworth. Like them, he makes a fundamental critique of so-called classical economics — which states that each of us is a self-interested agent, out for ourselves — and capitalism.

Amy Westervelt: Felber is not just writing and speaking, he's building a network of people around the world *acting* on the ideas he lays out, creating institutions designed to operate for the common good. But before we get to that, let's hear more about what he means by an economy for the common good.

John Biewen: By the “common good,” he means what you probably think he means: an ethic of concern for the wellbeing of all.

Christian Felber: Maybe the common good is just the summarizing value of these other values, from respect to solidarity to cooperation to dignity to sustainability. But the cultural value of the common good exists in all cultures. Maybe it doesn't have the same name. It's called *buen vivir* in Latin America, or *ubuntu* in Africa, or National Happiness in Bhutan. But there is no culture on this planet which does not know the lead value of the common good.

John Biewen: Felber points out that many national and state constitutions refer to the common good – even the deeply flawed U.S. Constitution. It's in what is I think the very best part of the document, Amy. The preamble.

Amy Westervelt: “We the people.” We the people! ... “in order to form a more perfect Union, establish Justice, insure domestic Tranquility, provide for the common defence, promote *the general Welfare....*”

John Biewen: There it is, the general welfare. The common good. This is Felber's point: Every country, every culture, every spiritual tradition, knows what those words mean and we hoist them up and salute them. And yet:

Christian Felber: We have designed and constructed an economic system which is not promoting and strengthening these values, but all [to] the contrary, undermining them, and propagating and implementing a different value system, which is absurd. Why do we strive for egoism and utility maximization and acting one against the other, thinking that competition is better than cooperation, and thinking that on a finite planet, endless growth is possible? So, it's really, it's a sick way of thinking.

Amy Westervelt: Wow. A sick way of thinking. Those are strong words. But where's the lie?

John Biewen: He's got other strong words. He calls it a "cultural catastrophe" that we in the West, especially, have adopted an economic model that so egregiously violates our own deepest values. And as for *homo economicus*, the "economic man" of econ textbooks for the past century, who makes decisions rationally, always with his own self-interest at heart?

Christian Felber: It's capitalist, or capitalistic, man, and that's a psychopath and a sociopath.

Amy Westervelt: OK! When Felber says that, he's not just spouting his own 21st-century lefty opinion, is he? He goes back to ancient Greece to make the point that modern, capitalist societies have made a horrific departure even from traditional *Western* values.

John Biewen: And this may sound like a historical footnote, but I think it's important. As Felber points out, Aristotle — 4th century BCE — distinguished between economics and what he called ... chrematistics.

Amy Westervelt: Chrema what now?

John Biewen: I know. *If* I came across this word in undergrad Ancient Philosophy class, I forgot it long ago. But stay with me. Economics – *oikonomia*, the word was coined in ancient Greece, a century before Aristotle — economics meant “household management.”

Amy Westervelt: Ah. More like the “home ec” class a lot of us might have taken in school. So it refers to the work of running the home, the family budget, acquiring food and the other household needs.

John Biewen: Yeah. And in Aristotle’s view, any exchange in an economic system should be about the actual value of things — not more — always keeping in mind the well-being of everyone involved and of the wider community. So, Felber says, if you evoked “homo economicus,” the economic person, for Aristotle and the Greeks, who would have come to mind for them?

Christian Felber: The first economic person is a woman. And she was caring and cooperative and sufficient and respectful with other humans and with nature.

Amy Westervelt: Hmm. So, economics, as Aristotle understood it, was not about making money. In fact, he considered it wrong to take profits beyond what you need to cover your costs and to live. So, let me guess, that's what Aristotle meant by that other word, chrematistics.

John Biewen: Exactly. Chrematistics is the art of getting rich, of accumulating wealth. Aristotle called that an unnatural, dehumanizing focus for a human being. So, Christian Felber argues, what we have in most of the 21st century world is not an economic system, in the original sense of the word, but a chrematistic system.

Christian Felber: And we should distinguish these words, and we should not allow chrematists to occupy chairs of economics.

[Music]

Amy Westervelt: Mmm. I'm with him, in principle. But what would it mean to transform our society's economic life along these lines? What does an economy for the common good look like? Is it ... socialism?

John Biewen: Well it depends on what you mean by socialism — it's a big word that gets used in a whole bunch of ways. But he would say no.

Christian Felber: In my books I try to explain that it's not about capitalism versus socialism....

John Biewen: His economy for the common good is market-based, but Christian calls it an *ethical* market economy. So, the current system rewards profit-making and, if anything, gives the advantage to *unethical* business people.

Amy Westervelt: Because you can cut your costs and make bigger profits by not cleaning up your environmental messes, for example, or by paying poverty wages, and so on.

John Biewen: In the economy for the common good, communities would get together and decide, democratically, on a different set of incentives. In Felber's formulation, those incentives should serve five values: human dignity, solidarity, justice, ecological sustainability, and democracy.

Amy Westervelt: Wow. Imagine that.

John Biewen: The community draws up a matrix that includes the specific variables it cares about and concrete ways of measuring them. Then, each organization — each company, non-profit, whatever — tallies an annual common good balance sheet showing how they performed.

Amy Westervelt: So they gain points, for example, if they pay equal wages to people of every gender and ethnicity, if they deal honestly with their customers and their competitors, and if their products and their practices are good for democracy — hello, Facebook and Fox News! — and good for the environment. They lose points if they don't meet those standards.

John Biewen: And, Felber says, this is crucial: the results don't just go on a label or a website. The consequences are real. The community's laws, tax codes, and lending and investing institutions would reward enterprises with a positive common good balance sheet, and *penalize* those that just extract maximum profits while paying unlivable wages or polluting the land and the atmosphere.

[Music]

John Biewen: Here's an example I like, even though it doesn't seem to be about ecology —though of course everything is.

Amy Westervelt: It's all connected, of course.

John Biewen: In 2021, the Economic Policy Institute says, the average CEO of the biggest corporations in the United States made 351 times the pay of the typical worker in, uh, his company.

Amy Westervelt: Yeah, you might as well go ahead and use that male pronoun since more than 90% of Fortune 500 CEOs are dudes. Wow, 351 times! That's staggering.

John Biewen: Yes, and this is — this is not of the lowest-paid worker, this is 351 times the *average* worker in the company. This ratio has gone up and up for decades. Researchers estimate that in 1950, CEOs in the U.S. made about 20 times as much as the average worker.

Amy Westervelt: So, let me guess, in the Economy for the Common Good, the people in a given city or state could decide, through that democratic process, what is an appropriate ratio for the highest-paid vs. the average worker in an organization. Twenty times, a hundred times, five times?

John Biewen: And businesses would lose points on their Common Good Balance Sheet if they violate that standard. They'd have to pay higher taxes or face other consequences. In a similar way, a corporation that's polluting or contributing to climate change would lose Common Good points. Its taxes would be high, investment in the company might be blocked. It certainly wouldn't be eligible for government subsidies, as oil companies have been for decades.

Amy Westervelt: And, companies that act as *good* corporate citizens....

Christian Felber: Those who take care more than others and are more responsible and sustainable, they pay less taxes and they get priority in public procurement or in economic promotion programs, or they trade more freely, or they get a cheaper finance from banks and stock markets — of course, Common Good banks and Common Good stock markets.

John Biewen: Given *those* advantages, these businesses could lower their prices, too, and gain an advantage in the marketplace. So, again, it's still a market, as Felber envisions it —just one with the incentives turned on their heads, or sideways, or something.

Amy Westervelt: It's easy to imagine some people screaming: Wait, you're gonna start meddling in the free market, telling companies how to behave? But of course there is no unfettered, "free" market. In every capitalist country, laws regulate what businesses can and can't do, the tax code creates boatloads of incentives and disincentives, banks use criteria when deciding whether to give a loan, and so on. Government policy props up entire industries because we think they're important for some reason — which doesn't necessarily even mean they make something that anybody needs. It often just means they make money and create jobs.

John Biewen: So, the question is not, should we have guidelines for how corporations and other enterprises behave, should we put a finger on the scale to help some businesses. We do that. The question is, what should the incentives be, and who should decide?

Amy Westervelt: Yeah. I don't remember having a say, as a citizen, about how much corporations can pay their CEOs, or whether oil companies should get billions in

subsidies even though they're destroying a river in Nigeria or lying for decades about the threat of climate chaos. John, as we said, Christian Felber and his organization are trying to get people to put these principles into practice.

John Biewen: That's right. After a decade of work, he and his colleagues have recruited members in 35 countries. As of late 2021, almost 800 businesses have signed on as Common Good enterprises, drawing up Common Good balance sheets. Several dozen cities have become chapters, incorporating these principles into their work — mostly in Europe, with just one in the U.S. so far: Boulder, Colorado.

Amy Westervelt: But of course, it's voluntary so far. And there are other expressions of this general idea: Companies that declare their own commitments to doing business ethically and sustainably. Projects like the B Corporation system, in which a non-profit certifies companies as B Corps if they meet certain criteria that benefit their employees, communities, and the environment, not just their shareholders' wallets.

John Biewen: That example I gave earlier, about executive pay? Portland, Oregon is trying a modest version of that. Since 2016, Portland has levied a special tax on companies based in the city if they pay their executives more than 100 times the company's median pay. The tax brings in several million dollars a year, but apparently it isn't steep enough to change those companies' practices.

Amy Westervelt: So, why is this idea still fringe? Why don't we have an Economy for the Common Good? Christian Felber says that question brings us back to our lack of real democracy.

Christian Felber: If people had a direct choice between different models of the economy, they would already today vote for an Economy for the Common Good rather than for capitalism or socialism. There are surveys that confirm that. In Germany, one of the surveys is that people were asked if they preferred to hold on to GDP or replace it by something like a Common Good Product or Gross National Happiness. The result was in Germany that only 18 percent of the population voted in favor of continuing with GDP, and two-thirds of the population, they would prefer to replace it by a Common Good Product.

[Music]

Amy Westervelt: Lots of opinion surveys show deep dissatisfaction with the current economic order. In a 2021 survey from Axios and Momentive, fifty-four percent of young Americans held a negative view of capitalism. But the really eye-opening finding in the survey, though, was that the number of young Republicans who thought favorably of capitalism had declined from 81 percent in 2019 to 66 percent in 2021.

John Biewen: This is something I find really striking about Christian Felber's approach to an Economy for the Common Good: his emphasis on democracy. It does seem that what he's describing could be called a kind of democratic socialism, or social democracy. By the way, Amy, the Economy for the Common Good would outlaw investment income. No more making money from money; companies can only pay people who work for the company. Whether you agree with Christian about the details or the labels, what he's asking us to imagine is an economy that we the people design. And we design it so it serves and feeds people and other living things, not the other way around.

Amy Westervelt: Along with a growing number of people, he's saying we could and should demand that kind of world.

[Music]

[BREAK]

Amy Westervelt: John, I'm thinking back to those many months when we were in the planning and research stages for this season, and our struggles over the series title. I

think *The Repair* was your first choice from the start, and after wavering and leaning toward other titles along the way, we landed again on *The Repair*.

John Biewen: Yeah. For one thing, we all — and this includes our terrific story editor, Cheryl Devall — we all wanted a title that offered hope, or, if not hope, courage, to borrow from Kate Marvel whom you paraphrased last time. We knew we wanted to talk about solutions and how to respond to the emergency. And we knew we wanted to build on the previous three seasons on this show, and make connections throughout between the world's ecological crisis and those huge systemic power structures and injustices that we'd explored in Seasons 2 through 4.

Amy Westervelt: Yes. Let's go to the tape – this is us introducing Episode 1:

[Music: harp flashback flourish]

Amy Westervelt: *Over the last three seasons, you and your collaborators have told the story of a patriarchal, white supremacist society with deeply antidemocratic structures in place. A society built first and foremost for the extraction of wealth, by the relative few, at the expense of millions of exploited people and the natural world.*

John Biewen: Yeah. So what might all of that have to do with our ecological crisis?

Amy Westervelt: Right. Other than everything.

[Music: Harp flourish]

Amy Westervelt: So now, here we are in the finale, talking about a cultural transformation, starting with a profound overhaul of our society's economic life. Which could fix a lot of those structural inequities that break along lines of race and ethnicity, gender, and class. But repair also means talking about history — acknowledging past crimes and making them right, or at least doing what we can to pay *some* of those moral and economic debts.

John Biewen: During the season we've talked about climate reparations, or loss and damages payments, between nations. And last time you spoke with Tamara Toles O'Laughlin about reparations for environmental racism in the U.S. For this episode I spoke with this gentleman.

Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò: I'm Olúfẹ́mi O. Táíwò. I'm the author of *Reconsidering Reparations*. I teach philosophy at Georgetown University.

Amy Westervelt: Fẹmi Táíwò's work focuses on social and political philosophy and the anti-colonial Black radical tradition. His book, which we both got a chance to read, is brand new, just coming out about the time this episode does at the end of 2021.

John Biewen: And clearly, in this episode, we're trying to go big or go home — or, go big *and then* go home. Because Christian Felber wants to *Change Everything*, and here's how Fẹmi Táíwò describes what he set out to do in *Reconsidering Reparations*.

Olúfẹmi Táíwò: It is basically an attempt to re-say something that I think was common sense in a bygone era, and that people still think, but is not quite as fashionable as it was in maybe the 60s or 70s. But that is that the task of racial justice is to rebuild the world, to literally rebuild the world.

[Music]

Amy Westervelt: In your conversation with Táíwò, he said what we said at the top of this episode: Big change is coming, like it or not, because of the climate emergency. Again, either we're going to handle it, making deep change in how we do almost everything, and soon, or climate chaos is gonna handle us, and not gently.

John Biewen: So, looking at that reality through the frame of racial justice, Femi talks about the 500-year-old global economic order that we've examined on this show, most directly in our *Seeing White* series. Some call it racial capitalism; Táíwò prefers to call it Global Racial Empire. He writes this: "The aqueducts that contain and discipline the continuous motion of the past into the future were laid in the 17th, 18th, and 19th centuries. Wealth flows in one direction and pollution and its impact in the other."

Olúfemi Táíwò: Whatever else our world is, it's a distribution system. Right? It's the reason why wealth ends up over there and poverty ends up over here. It's the reason why other bad things, that aren't necessarily themselves wealth but have to do with wealth, end up in some places rather than others, whether it's incarceration rates or toxic waste. And that system is not incidentally related to our social and political system, it *is* our social political system. When we're talking about redistribution, we're talking about reconstituting the basic political relationships.

Amy Westervelt: If we don't transform our basic political relationships — if we don't tear down and rebuild those aqueducts — our responses to the climate crisis will be just

as colonial and exploitative as the Global Racial Empire we're living in today. And we're already seeing that happen.

[Music]

John Biewen: If repair means anything, it means countries that built their wealth through slavery have huge moral and material debts to pay. At the same time, settler colonial societies, the U.S. certainly included, committed crimes against Indigenous peoples too enormous to ever make right. But we could begin by giving land back — and learning lessons about how to live with, and on, the places we inhabit.

Jessica Hernandez: In order for us to heal our landscapes, or even heal our environment, especially as we continue to experience climate change, we kind of have to look at solutions in a holistic lens. And that's also including that Indigenous science.

John Biewen: Jessica Hernandez has a Ph.D. in Environmental and Forest Sciences and teaches at the University of Washington Bothell.

Amy Westervelt: She grew up in Los Angeles; her father is Maya Ch'orti' from El Salvador, her mother, Zapotec from southern Mexico. We devoted an episode to efforts around the world to build Indigenous conceptions of nature into Western *legal* systems. In her work, Hernandez tries to combine Western and Indigenous *science*.

Jessica Hernandez: My training in the Western sciences kind of showed me, especially as a young person going through this educational training, that a lot of the knowledge that was taught in those classes was knowledge that my dad had already taught me. The only difference is that my dad did not have that Western terminology that is attached to certain things. Like for instance, something that I was really always interested in was biomechanics, and I think that biomechanics was one of my specialties doing marine science, where I was always interested in the way that fish, you know, aquatic species, moved. And I think that, my dad would teach me a lot about animal behavior, especially fish behavior, because he was a fisherman. And also he would teach me about the biomechanics of the fishes, like why fish move a certain way. But obviously it was taught through that traditional knowledge and the traditional languages....

John Biewen: Jessica's new book is *Fresh Banana Leaves: Healing Indigenous Landscapes Through Indigenous Science*. There's a story behind that title.

Jessica: Yeah, so my father was 11 years old when he was, you know, forced to decide whether he was going to join the military from the government side or the *guerrilla*....

John Biewen: Hernandez' father became a child soldier when the Salvadoran Civil War broke out in the late 1970s. Government soldiers were trying to conscript him, so to avoid fighting with them he joined the Indigenous rebels. [Music] While the guerillas were training him and other young recruits in the jungle, Jessica says, her father found refuge in a banana tree. He made friends, is how she puts it.

Jessica Hernandez: Like he will go and play with the banana tree, he will climb the branches. A lot of his other, [the] other children were scared of heights, so he will also bring down bananas for the other children who were scared of heights. Because my dad was kind of fearless, right?....

Amy Westervelt: But government forces found the training camp, and one day the planes came. Bombs fell nearby.

Jessica Hernandez: So, my dad, being a child, being scared, he ran under the banana tree where he used to play. And he saw a bomb kind of drop on the tree, but instead of it igniting, he saw how the leaves kind of wrapped it and the bomb did not, you know, ignite, so the bomb was kind of dormant. He explains how he saw his short life flashed before his eyes, and he thought that he was going to die, right, and he was seeing the gruesome scenery that the bombs were creating.

Amy Westervelt: It seemed to her father that his friend, the banana tree, had saved him.

Jessica: And he was actually, he was in disbelief. It kind of seems like it's something that's taken from a cartoon or this, like, dream, but in reality it was something that my dad experienced. And I think that one of the lessons that he learned and, you know, that he passed down to me is that nature protects you as long as you protect nature.

[Music]

John Biewen: Amy, I looked up the etymology of the word "repair." From Old French and Latin, to mend, put back in order. It also means to return, to go home. In Episode 1

we talked about this modern, short-sighted, aggressive, exploitative relationship with the rest of the natural world as a recent departure for our species. After two or three hundred thousand years of human history, the West developed extractive capitalism — a core aspect of Global Racial Empire — just a few hundred years ago. So, it's kind of funny, isn't it, to notice which end of the political spectrum claims the word "conservative."

Amy Westervelt: Yeah. In many ways, most of us would not want to go back in time. But when Jessica Hernandez and other Indigenous people talk about Land Back, they are talking about several kinds of restoration. The restoration and recognition of tribal sovereignty. The return of stolen land and public land to the stewardship of the peoples who lived on *and with* those places long before the settlers arrived. And the dismantling of white supremacy, which is also a recent arrival along with our settler ancestors. Remember in our "Pachamama" episode when Annette Sykes, the Maori activist in New Zealand, talked about wishing that colonization would get back on the plane to the UK? This is one of the ways Indigenous folks sum up the Land Back movement: It's not that all settlers need to go away, but colonialism does.

John Biewen: Here's Jessica Hernandez.

Jessica Hernandez: Land back is just basically meaning that Indigenous peoples are given the political power to govern natural resources, to steward our landscapes, to make decisions that are related to our natural resources. And it doesn't mean that, you know, we have to dismiss or deport people who are not indigenous to this continent, but rather kind of work in union and also kind of teach one another on how to better steward our lands.

[Music]

Jessica Hernandez: We cannot go back to the ways that we once lived because, you know, colonization did happen. Colonization still has impacts. So I think that it's finding a medium, meeting each other halfway to be able to heal, not just ourselves as Indigenous peoples, but also heal our landscapes, heal other Indigenous peoples whose indigeneity has been fractured. And I think, I talk about the Black community, African-Americans, and how their indigeneity has been fractured because of slavery, right? They were stolen from their indigenous lands and brought across the Americas to work for free on stolen land. And I think that, you know, when we talk about land back, we also have to make room for our Black relatives to kind of also reclaim the indigeneity that has been fractured or erased because of slavery.

Land back is kind of like this holistic way of healing everyone that's within the Americas. But at the end, letting the Indigenous peoples of those lands kind

of steward the lands and kind of heal our landscapes, as we continue to face climate change impacts.

[Music]

John Biewen: Let's come back to that question of what's possible — whether people across the globe can mobilize to remake the world. Fẹmi Táíwò, the Georgetown philosopher, points to an example from recent history, the middle of the 20th century.

Olúfẹmi Táíwò: I think we've already seen the kind of mobilization that it's going to require. And, at least on that level, we're in the enviable position of doing again something that we know can be done.

Amy Westervelt: So, what's he referring to? The Civil Rights Movement in the U.S.?

John Biewen: Well, no — though that movement was somewhat related to the one Fẹmi is talking about. I was thinking, too, in the interview, what is this great mobilization? But of course, that's because I'm a white American and a lifelong consumer of more-or-less mainstream American media, which focuses almost entirely

on the U.S. and the so-called developed world. Femi is a child of Nigerian immigrants. That's a clue.

Amy Westervelt: Ah. OK. So, he's talking about the national liberation movements of the 1950s and 60s, that pretty much ended formal Western colonialism across Africa, Asia, and the Caribbean.

Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò: Prior to the Second World War, the British Empire alone controlled twenty five percent of the landmass and the population of the globe.

John Biewen: When the United Nations was founded in 1945, it had just 51 members.

Olúfẹ́mi Táíwò: By the 1970s, there was closer to 130 members of the United Nations. What I'm trying to communicate by that is the sense of how much of the world, how many people, were involved in the struggle for national liberation and against the former, formal version of colonialism.

John Biewen: It took transnational organizing, much of it led by students and labor unions, writers, people donating money, and more. True enough, Femi says, the anti-colonialist movement did not achieve everything that people in the Global South hoped for. Neo-colonialism lives on, as we've pointed out this season. Under independent rule, many of those countries have deep problems. But:

Olúfẹmi Táíwò: But it was a move towards justice. I'm not aware of a larger and more seismic shift in global politics in human history. There has already been a planetary-scale movement for justice, and not a completely successful one, but a successful one. And we need one of those, right? If we're gonna meet the challenge of climate crisis in a way that builds justice rather than reconfigures injustice.

Amy Westervelt: In the last chapter of his book, *Reconsidering Reparations*, Fẹmi Táíwò writes a fascinating and truly moving essay. He calls it “The Arc of the Moral Universe.”

John Biewen: He’s evoking Martin Luther King, Jr., of course, who said “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.”

Amy Westervelt: As they often do with Dr. King, people misunderstand the quotation, believing he was claiming that it’s impossible to stop history’s move toward justice. In the same speech, he explicitly said otherwise. Human progress, he said, “never rolls in on the wheels of inevitability. It comes through the tireless efforts and the persistent work of dedicated individuals who are willing to be co-workers with God.”

can look at the immense scale of our challenge as something to grow in response to. And I think that's the way to look at it. You know, we as individuals and groups and organizations that are alive now, we have responsibilities to expand what's possible for the people who are kids now and the people who aren't yet kids. And whether or not that means us personally seeing the Promised Land, there's responsibility and value and joy, even, in doing our part of this multigenerational project.

Archival audio, Martin Luther King, Jr., Memphis, Tennessee, April 3, 1968:

Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He has allowed me to go up to the mountain. And I've looked over, and I've seen the Promised Land. [Audience shouts] I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight that we as a people will get to the Promised Land! [Applause, cheers]

[Music]

John Biewen: When he's talking about what he calls "revolutionary patience," Femi says he's thinking of Global Racial Empire and the grossly exploitative form of capitalism we have now. Eradicating them may take multiple lifetimes. But he agrees we can't afford that kind of patience when it comes to the climate emergency.

Amy Westervelt: Planet Earth and its atmosphere, which we have altered so disastrously, operate on *their* schedule, and the clock is ticking. Loudly. Still, though, even when it comes to the climate crisis and our response to it, there's a way in which the perspective of the ancestor feels really important.

John Biewen: I agree. I asked Fẹmi to read a couple of sentences from his book that, I confess, choked me up when I read them.

Olúfẹmi Táíwò, reading: We should think about our ancestors, but we will win and lose our own ethical battles based on what we do for our descendants. We are defined by what kind of ancestors we choose to be.

[Music]

Amy Westervelt: [Sighs.] Mmm. On that powerful note, that's Scene on Radio Season 5, done.

John Biewen: It's been so, so good working with you on this, Amy. Thank you.

Amy Westervelt: It's been amazing, John. I feel like we've covered this immense breadth of stuff that I obsess about constantly, and it's been a delight to work through it with you.

John Biewen: This season of Scene on Radio was conceived, produced, and mixed by me, John Biewen, with a whole bunch of reporting and other indispensable input from Amy Westervelt. Our script editor, Cheryl Devall, did heroic work from start to finish. Other reporting by Nita Roshita in Indonesia, Ugochi Anyaka-Oluigbo in Nigeria, Tareq Ahmed in Bangladesh, Victoria McArthur in Scotland, Polyglot Barbershop in Ecuador and Lyndal Rowlands in New Zealand. Big thanks to the composers of this season's music: Lili Haydn, Kim Carroll, Chris Westlake, Lesley Barber, Cora Miron, Fabian Almazan, goodnight Lucas, Alex Weston, and Maetar. Music consulting and occasional production help from Joe Augustine of Narrative Music. A shoutout to the fantastic communications team at CDS: Liz Phillips and Mara Guevarra. Whitney Baker built our website, sceneonradio.org, where we post transcripts among other stuff. Special thanks to Jess Jiang for creating those transcripts. The director of CDS is Opeyemi Olukemi. Scene on Radio is distributed by PRX, and comes to you from the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University.