

Scene on Radio

Season 5, Episode 10: The Power Structure, Not the Energy Source

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: Hey Amy, I've got a couple of questions for you about where things stand. Here on planet Earth.

Amy Westervelt: Oh boy, *this* sounds easy.

John Biewen: You are a leading climate journalist. You stay up to speed on the science, you follow the chorus of analysts and observers who size up that science and debate what it means. So, question number one: How screwed *are* we? Is it too late? Just time to resign ourselves to ecological collapse and therefore the end of civilization as we know it?

Amy Westervelt: No. No, no, no. NOPE, no!

John Biewen: So in other words, it sounds like what you're telling me is, "no."

Amy Westervelt: Yeah, that's right. I think we really need to embrace the happy medium — or maybe not so much happy as...gritty? Between what Climate Twitter has named "the doomers" and the folks peddling "hopium." For a long time, the climate movement, including climate scientists, did actually a pretty bad job of being real with people about just how dire the situation was. I remember actually when David Wallace-Wells wrote the magazine piece that became the book *The Uninhabitable Earth*, a lot of folks in Climate World went kinda nuts about how he was going to send folks into a panicked paralysis. He was giving them this worst-case scenario and it was going to end any kind of will to live or do anything at all about climate.

John Biewen: Mm. And what that book presents really *is* the worst-case scenario, warming of 3 or 4 or 5 or more degrees Celsius that would trigger wide-scale ecosystem collapse. What most scientists seem to be saying now is that we're on track for... about two and a half degrees of warming.

Amy Westervelt: Right, which is really not great! We've already lost species and we will lose more. Part of the reason that scientists kind of had this 1.5 degree goal for so long was to stop some of that ecosystem collapse and loss. We're already seeing an unstable climate and it will get worse. Sea level has already risen and Miami Beach will absolutely be under water in about 30 years. So sugarcoating it for people doesn't really help. And at the same time, encouraging folks to just sort of take their ball and go home, batten down the hatches and wait for collapse, well, we're not quite there yet and,

frankly, that feels like a really entitled response. And the response of what I would call a bad ancestor. The doomer camp is, perhaps unsurprisingly, overwhelmingly white, male, and rich.

John Biewen: You don't say. But given what you've just said about the changes coming, adaptation is something we do need to do, right?

Amy Westervelt: Yeah. For a really long time there was this sort of debate raging about mitigation or adaptation, like we need to either reduce emissions or adapt to a changing climate, and a lot of people saw adaptation as a sort of giving up on emissions reductions. But I think that's kind of dumb — obviously we need to do both. Because the other important thing for folks to understand is that a lot of global warming is already baked in, kind of no matter what we do. Unless there's a giant breakthrough in negative emissions technology, this thing of pulling CO₂ out of the air. Because that's just how CO₂ works — it's a long-lived greenhouse gas. So, warming that we're experiencing now is from emissions that happened, you know, thirty, forty years ago. And so far, we cannot roll back the clock on emissions already in the atmosphere — although a lot of very wealthy folks are trying very hard to make that happen.

John Biewen: You used to hear this phrase “carbon capture and sequestration.” These days it seems to be just expressed more often “capture and storage.”

Amy Westervelt: Right. Or people will abbreviate it to CCS a lot. And carbon capture and storage *could* enable emissions reductions. So in an ideal scenario, you'd have a carbon capture device at a power plant or some other kind of big manufacturing facility sucking up emissions right from the smokestack. But that doesn't take care of all emissions and it doesn't take care of historic emissions. So right now if you include all of the planned carbon capture projects, we're talking about 0.1 percent of current emissions, so... I'm skeptical of the hype around this stuff. Because, you know, it also enables the status quo where burning fossil fuels is considered. And also because what it's mostly being used for now is something called enhanced oil recovery — basically oil companies inject CO₂ underground to extract more oil. Not exactly a climate solution.

John Biewen: And yet it's being advertised as a big climate solution.

Amy Westervelt: Then there's also what's called negative emissions technology — I mentioned this a few minutes ago — which would actually be able to draw CO₂ out of the atmosphere. So that could actually get at some of these historic emissions. CO₂ that's just been hanging out for a long time. With carbon storage and negative emissions, the technology has mostly existed for a while. But nobody's figured out how to deploy it at scale, and safely. And frankly, the idea that we're going to let the oil and gas industry build a bunch of pipelines all over the country for transporting and storing CO₂ — a gas that can actually poison people if there's a leak — seems ... terrifying?

John Biewen: Just a little! But the headline here is that it's not too late to save a whole lot of what we depend on and love in this world. And maybe, a person can dream, just maybe we could make things better than they are now, better than they've been, if this emergency pushes us to take big, bold action. Imagine, we could have a wilder and healthier living planet than we have now. Societies vastly *more* just and healthy in all kinds of ways than the ones we live in today.

Amy Westervelt: And there are actually some ideas and policies being embraced that are a lot less pie-in-the-sky than some sort of giant carbon-sucking vacuum. For one thing, a lot of governments, from the local to national level all over the world, are getting pretty serious about curbing methane emissions. And that's a big deal because unlike CO₂, methane is a super short-lived gas, so if we could get a handle on that, it could reduce temperatures quickly and buy us some time to catch up on decarbonization. We'll get into some more policy stuff in a minute, but first I want you to hear from one of my favorite climate scientists, Dr. Kate Marvel. She's written really eloquently about how we need courage more than hope — and what I like about her is that she's very realistic about climate change, doesn't sugarcoat anything, but she's not a pessimist about it. I hang onto something she said to me a few years back.

Kate Marvel: I do have no patience whatsoever for inevitability and apocalyptic narratives.

Amy Westervelt: Yeah.

Kate Marvel: Because I know that if we put a bunch of carbon dioxide in the air, it will get hotter and bad things will happen. Droughts, floods, stronger hurricanes, forest fires. But I don't know anything about the possible trajectories that human society could take. And because it's human societies that are putting that carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases into the atmosphere, there are so many different ways in which that society could evolve. And some of them are societies that I really want to live in, and some of them are societies that are a nightmare to me.

Amy Westervelt: Yeah.

Kate Marvel: So I think focusing on creating the kind of society that I want to live in is really important right now.

John Biewen: We'll have a lot more to say about creating a society we want to live in, in this episode and the next one. But for now, here's my other question, Amy. If we don't act — or don't pivot hard enough and fast enough — what is in store for us?

Amy Westervelt: Well, when it comes to climate impacts there really is no "we." Some parts of the world will experience much worse consequences than others, much sooner.

Our international collaborators this season have made that really clear. Temperatures increase at different speeds everywhere, and those temperature increases have different effects in different parts of the world. So in many regions, for example, we've *already* surpassed that 1.5 degree of warming that scientists and activists have targeted as a limit not to exceed. But in broad strokes, at 1.5 degrees Celsius warming, which we're almost certain to hit globally at this point, about 14 percent of Earth's population will be exposed to severe heat waves at least once every five years. At 2 degrees warming that proportion jumps to 37 percent, and the deadly heat waves India and Pakistan saw in 2015 could become annual occurrences. At 2 to 3 degrees of warming, we'll also see widespread drought and water scarcity, with people in river basins — particularly in the Middle and Near East — especially vulnerable. To show you how much difference just a half a degree can make, NASA estimates that limiting warming to 1.5 degrees Celsius would protect 184 to 270 million people from water scarcity. That's a lot of people. And then, of course, some people will have the opposite problem: too much water. Hundred-year floods could become annual occurrences, entire coastal communities and island nations would disappear, and extreme weather disasters will become the norm.

John Biewen: Yeah, our episodes from Bangladesh, Nigeria and Indonesia offered a glimpse of that world today.

Amy Westervelt: And we've wasted so much time — half a century or more since scientists first started sounding the alarm about this. Now, incremental change, so-

called “moderation,” is just not an option. The time for that passed us by in the 1980s and 90s.

John Biewen: So, this is what scientists and activists are shouting more urgently than ever: It’s a genuine emergency *now* and we have to act accordingly.

[Music: Theme]

John Biewen: From the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University, this is Scene on Radio, Season 5: The Repair, Episode 10. The penultimate episode. I’m John Biewen.

Amy Westervelt: I’m Amy Westervelt. This time, we go deep on the question we raised back in Episode 1: What will it take to save ourselves? What would repair look like? We start with policy — the actions that governments and other institutions must take *now*, to head off the most disastrous results of climate change.

John Biewen: There are so many layers and threads to this, but don’t they all add up to this: we need to phase out the burning of fossil fuels and other causes of warming, and fast. We’ve got to push down hard on that curve on the graph — especially, and first, in the Global North, the historic emitter countries that long ago burned way more than our

fair share of greenhouse gases. Right? I keep seeing figures from climate scientists like 8 to 12 percent emissions cuts *per year* for this decade and beyond are required to stay below 1.5 degrees of warming. We are, emphatically, not doing that yet. So here's one more central question for this episode, Amy: how do we do it, and what does it look like?

Amy Westervelt: I interviewed a range of people to address that from multiple angles, but stay with me, John.

John Biewen: Okay. Yes. We decided that like with Chenjerai in our last episode of Season 4, we'll both stick around through these last couple of episodes as we really dig into solutions.

Ken Caldeira: You know, back in the 80s we believed the information deficit model of social change and that if we could only get the information to policymakers that they would do the right thing.

Amy Westervelt: This is Ken Caldeira, he's a really well-known climate scientist. His work helped the world understand ocean acidification. Some environmental activists have also criticized him over the years for embracing nuclear, always a hot-button issue. But forget all of that stuff, because we're not talking science today, or even technology. We're talking about the factor that's blocking climate action: political will. Caldeira's words to me a few years back have bounced around in my head ever since:

Ken Caldeira: And now we see in the age of Trump that it's, it's not about information deficit, it's about power relations and people wanting to keep economic and political power. So that just telling people some more climate science isn't going to help anything. I don't understand how social change happens when it challenges the interests of a well-entrenched and powerful minority. And I mean it seems to me that that's the central question of how that happens and it's not climate science, it's political strategy. And I just don't, I have no idea what the right answer is but I'd like to know.

Amy Westervelt: A year or so after that interview, Caldeira went to work for Bill Gates on climate. And that also made some people mad. But in the context of trying to answer this question, it made some sense to me: getting a close-up peek at what makes billionaires tick seems useful for trying to figure out how to change the world's power structures.

[Music]

John Biewen: There are lots of ideas for how to attack climate change, from big bold visions to obscure energy policy, local to national, and on and on. But driving the *will* to change, getting the people with power who benefit from extraction in the short term to *care* about those who suffer from it, that's a tougher nut to crack. Especially in places

like the U.S. where people generally don't see models for less extractive ways of living. But as we heard in our last episode, healthier models abound in Indigenous communities all over the world.

Julian Brave Noisecat: This year I was actually back in my family's homelands during the salmon fishing season when the salmon run up river.

Amy Westervelt: This is Julian Brave Noisecat, a First Nations writer and activist. He's spent quite a bit of time in the policy trenches here in the U.S. His family's home is in British Columbia.

Julian Brave Noisecat: After a number of years of very poor runs, which has had a number of factors that have depleted the salmon runs. Climate change is one of them because of hotter waters off the Pacific. You know, we had a really amazing gift of so many fish running up the river, and the way that we fish them is with a gill net. I went out and fished three or four days. Now, as back in the day, that sort of supply of salmon was essential to getting our people through the winter, you know, salmon is an incredibly healthy food. Also, when they are consumed or when they reach the spawning grounds and die, their carcasses and all the sort of nutrients in them actually help the forests in the northwest, which are sort of epic, massive, these epic massive rainforests grow and actually

support all sorts of other forms of life. So they're sort of this like keystone species, this like, a central part of life in our part of the world.

John Biewen: Julian recalled a conversation with an elder.

Julian Brave Noisecat: And, you know, she was basically saying that the river and the salmon running in the river, and prayer, are basically the things that, like, helped our people survive in the wake of just utter devastation in the face of colonization and the loss of so much of our, of our land and so many of our people. And I think that she was obviously sort of right about that and that sort of network and relationship, that sort of economic system, which at the end of the day actually begins as a non-human economic system, a non-human sort of system of reciprocity where the salmon are coming in very significant numbers and nourishing just the entire land and earth in that area is, I think, another model of how things might be done.

John Biewen: Notice, again, the words Julian uses when he talks about the natural world in that place and among his people: Relationship. Reciprocity. Nurturing. We always need to be careful about romanticizing Indigenous understandings, but there's something unmistakable there that our settler culture long ago lost sight of. We're gonna

get into this more in the next episode, but it reminds me of the degrowth movement in its various flavors — the simple recognition of limits and our need to live within them.

Amy Westervelt: And that topic really freaks a lot of people out, but objectively there are finite resources on this planet and we kinda need to learn how not to run out of em!

John Biewen: And, hello, to not spew more toxins than the planet can absorb.

Amy Westervelt: The other option is an endless devotion to growth at all costs and, as climate impacts increase, what Canadian journalist Naomi Klein calls “disaster capitalism.”

Naomi Klein: Where in the aftermath of these shocking events, like wars, economic crises, and increasingly natural disasters, there is a kind of corporate feeding frenzy. That was certainly the case in New Orleans after Katrina. So I went there because Halliburton was there and, and Blackwater was there and Bechtel was there and the charter school movement was there and all of these private, real estate developers were there. And it was just, like, this insane feeding frenzy before the water had even, you know, drained from the streets. There was this talk of how they were going to turn New Orleans into this

laboratory for a privatized, frankly racially cleansed city. And so that's what I was focusing on. But when I was there, I definitely had this feeling that I was looking at our collective future if we stay on the road we're on. That we would be facing a future with more of these kinds of climate shocks intersecting with a weak and neglected public sphere, overlaid with systems of white supremacy, and then disaster capitalists swooping in with plans to make it all more unequal.

John Biewen: We've certainly seen more of that in the pandemic. The thing about re-thinking our economic system and, maybe, embracing more of a degrowth approach, is that contrary to what critics of that idea suggest, it does not necessarily mean leaving a bunch of the world behind or reverting to some primitive way of life. In fact a lot of what we've been told about the "prosperity" that fossil fuels supposedly bestow on us all is just ... false.

Julia Steinberger: How these industries constantly shift their narrative to suit the economic conjecture.

Amy Westervelt: This is environmental economist Julia Steinberger. I talked to her right after she'd published a paper on the automotive industry, but she says the fossil fuel industry does this too. Really, all extractive and polluting industries do.

Julia Steinberger: So, if there's an economic growth period, they're like, we need more cars, more automotive capacity and more roads because we're preparing for growth. You need us to be ready for what's coming.

Amy Westervelt: Right.

Julia Steinberger: And if there's an economic downturn. It's like, you need to pour money into our industry. Because we're the industry that's going to restart the economy. And the reality is that their industries are completely inflexible, so they will die if there's no growth.

Amy Westervelt: So this is basically what's happening with gas prices at the moment too. When oil and gas prices slumped at the start of the pandemic because people weren't traveling and demand went down, the industry said, "the government must prop us up!" And now they're pushing this story that gas prices are up because of President Biden's environmental policies, like his decision to kill the Keystone XL pipeline. When in reality, prices are up because U.S. companies reduced production and laid off workers in the pandemic, and they've been slow to ramp up again. Because of course they like the higher prices, at least for a while.

John Biewen: It means bigger profits so they can make up that money they lost in the pandemic. So much of your work, Amy, has been about the many ways the oil and gas industry and their PR machines, have been selling the public a bill of goods for a century. Here's another plug for Amy's true crime podcast about climate change, *Drilled*. But the upshot is that we need more regular people to see through all this brainwashing, right? And to see that our reliance on oil and gas and coal is in fact killing us, and the only home we have. So, if we need to cut emissions by ten percent a year in the face of this enormously powerful, desperate-to-survive industry that has rigged the game in its own favor, what will that take?

[BREAK]

Amy Westervelt: What will it take to cut greenhouse gas emissions as fast as we need to cut them? It'll take some of everything, including a lot less consumption — especially of things like meat and dairy, the production of which is a huge source of methane and other emissions.

John Biewen: Those industries are also a leading cause of deforestation, including in the Amazon, as people clear land to raise more cattle for meat and leather, right?

Amy Westervelt: That's right, and it's a disaster. When it comes to fossil fuels, which of course is a core problem, a lot of progressives have started to call for nationalizing the oil industry. Here's journalist Kate Aronoff explaining what that means and why it might be a good idea.

Kate Aronoff: Something I have argued for is that the left should have its own kind of response to this moment, and be proposing a kind of state intervention into the fossil fuel industry, which sort of protects workers, looks to make sure that it's not just CEOs who are getting kind of bailed out in this situation, and ultimately to wind down production at the levels we know are necessary to deal with the climate crisis. So, just to give some sort of basic context for nationalization, which I think can sound almost like this really big sort of maximalist demand, is just to say that, you know, insofar as state involvement in oil is very matter of course, both in the U S and around the world, nationalization also has sort of a rich history in the United States and particularly for sort of navigating out of moments of crises. So, during World War II, about a quarter of all manufacturing in the United States was nationalized. More recently, the Bush administration nationalized airport security just after 9/11, and that created, you know, what we now know as TSA. And even, you know, the sort of bailouts we're accustomed to seeing. things like General Motors after the last crash, and you know, any number of the bailouts now, are kind of nationalization in which the

U.S. government just gives up its power, an equity stake, to, you know, have a say over how companies are run.

Amy Westervelt: And economist Julia Steinberger again on the industry's reliance on subsidies, which kind of makes it already very dependent on the government!

Julia Steinberger: They're not the main industries. They're the main predator, they're the main extractor. So they're the main bloodsucker on the society, you know, and they'll just say whatever it is, like they'll cover up the reality. But the reality is, the underlying reality is they want more subsidies all the time.

John Biewen: *That* is a pretty easy policy change, isn't it? I mean, just stop giving subsidies to the fossil fuel industry. Didn't Biden promise to do that during his campaign?

Amy Westervelt: Yeah, I mean it kind of seems like step one to transition, right? Like, maybe stop propping up the fossil fuel industry. And yes, Biden did promise that in his campaign. Now, of course the American Petroleum Institute would tell you that they don't get subsidies at all. But the International Monetary Fund estimates that globally, fossil fuel subsidies in 2020 were 5.9 trillion dollars.

John Biewen: Ugh. And that's from the IMF, not some lefty tree-hugging organization. So what *has* the Biden administration done about fossil fuel subsidies?

Amy Westervelt: So far, really nothing. There was some hope that, you know, subsidies could make their way into budget reconciliation — that's this haggling Congress is going through about the Build Back Better Act. But more than 50 other countries *have* reformed their subsidies since 2015. And while Biden hasn't necessarily delivered on his promise to be the "climate President," he *has* scored some wins. Shutting down the Keystone XL pipeline was a really big one. So was installing Deb Haaland, a member of the Laguna Pueblo, as the first Native Secretary of the Interior. Julian Noisecat spent a lot of time pushing for her confirmation.

Julian Brave Noisecat: That campaign for her representation in the cabinet and at the Interior Department, which manages about a fifth of the nation's landmass and lots of its natural resources, and also its relationship to the five hundred and seventy plus federally recognized American Indian Alaska Native tribes across the country. In my mind, the reason to make the case for her wasn't just that, you know, that kind of representation was historic and overdue, but also that by returning the management of this massive bureaucracy and its lands to a native woman who actually went to Standing Rock and cooked green chile stew and

tortillas for the water protectors, that we would be moving in the direction of, Indigenous peoples could potentially be empowered as sort of those first stewards of the land through more formal policy measures.

John Biewen: Under Secretary Haaland, the department has reinstated Bear's Ears in Utah — that's a sacred site for several tribes in the region — to national monument status. President Trump had revoked that status, opening the area up to mining. The federal government is also working on a plan to co-manage Tongass National Forest with tribes in Southeast Alaska.

Amy Westervelt: And, like Julian said, Secretary Haaland is already making steps toward improving the country's land policies and its relationships with sovereign tribal governments. Some of those steps aren't super noticeable if you don't know where to look. That's true of some other policy wins too, says Leah Stokes, a UC Santa Barbara professor. She helped write what was supposed to be the most ambitious climate component of Biden's Build Back Better plan, the Clean Electricity Performance Program. It would have required utilities to speed up their transition from fossil fuels and offered incentives for those making big strides and penalties for those falling behind. West Virginia coal baron and U.S. Senator Joe Manchin insisted that lawmakers cut that from the bill before he'd even consider it.

Leah Stokes: You know, when we lost the Clean Electricity Performance Program, that was a huge loss, really, personally for me too, because I had put so much of my time and energy into it. But the one thing that we did is by taking all the heat, by being so much the center of the package from the climate investments, we distracted from some of the changes in other parts of the bill, like the electricity tax credits. And the package that we have here is really transformative and it goes for like 10 years. That's something that we could have never done, I don't think, if we didn't sort of have the sacrificial lamb of the Clean Electricity Performance Program. If some of our enemies had more time to focus on attacking things, they probably would have gone after these tax credits. And so....

John Biewen: So, she's calling these tax credits a big win. That sounds like the kind of development that climate activists might dismiss as small potatoes.

Amy Westervelt: It's true! Yeah. So I asked Stokes to unpack it, because this is one of those wonky policy details that actually matters a lot. In all the justified criticism of oil and gas companies, we sometimes lose sight of the role utilities have played in delaying the energy transition. And a lot of that obstruction over the years has had a lot to do with the way tax credits for clean energy work.

Leah Stokes: Yeah, it's very in the weeds, right? Like, I wrote a whole book about electric utilities and why they were anti-wind and solar and fighting on these bills, and I didn't even really understand this dynamic until I was working on this federal bill, and I started to understand why utilities have been fighting wind and solar and proposing gas. It's partially because the incentives are wrong.

Amy Westervelt: The biggest problem is that a government tax credit only works if a utility owes the government taxes. But a lot of local utility companies, run by city governments or rural co-ops, and even a lot of for-profit utilities, don't actually pay much, or anything, in federal taxes. So a tax credit to produce more wind and solar energy just doesn't really offer them anything. There's no refund on taxes you don't pay. Leah says that's why private, for-profit companies have built most of the wind and solar projects in the U.S. so far. Because they can use the tax credits more easily. These private, independent power producers also typically have non-union work forces and pay their workers less.

Leah Stokes: And so, one thing that the Build Back Better Act is going to do is make it so that you don't have to owe the federal government money in order to get support from the government to build wind and solar. That's because the tax credits will be turned into direct pay mechanisms. It's basically like saying they're a grant rather than a tax credit. So that means that utilities of all stripes will be able to build, own and operate a lot more wind and solar, and they'll be able to

actually make money off those projects. They'll be able to use union labor to build those projects. So the Build Back Better Act is going to really change those incentives and maybe start turning electric utilities into renewable energy builders.

[Music]

John Biewen: Okay, so even without the Clean Electricity Performance Program, utilities might speed the transition because it benefits them to do so now, at least under this bill.

Amy Westervelt: Right, and the more they build, the more the cost of renewables will come down. And here's a pretty encouraging bit of data: as of late 2021, in nearly half the world, it's cheaper to build and operate new large-scale wind or solar plants than to run existing coal or gas-fired power plants. You know who said that? Noted tree-hugger blog, Bloomberg.

John Biewen: That is encouraging. But renewables still make up only about 20 percent of electricity generation in the United States. That's a long way from the 100 percent clean energy the Biden-Harris administration hopes to get to by 2035. And although

coal has been on a steep decline in recent years, even with Senator Manchin fighting for it, gas seems pretty hard to get rid of.

Amy Westervelt: True that. An increasing number of cities and counties all over the country are enacting bans on natural gas in new buildings. And just a quick note there that the term “natural gas” is always kind of being debated in the climate space. Most recently, folks are starting to call it either “fossil gas” or “methane gas,” with a slight preference for “methane gas,” because it apparently reads as the negative thing that it is. At any rate, these gas bans are part of the “Electrify Everything” movement. The idea is that with electric, we have a lot of power source options, but with gas, we’re pretty locked into...gas. And despite calling gas a “bridge fuel,” the industry really loves to build gas infrastructure we can never get rid of. But those bans have faced fierce opposition from fossil fuel companies and gas utilities. I met up with Heidi Harmon, the former mayor of San Luis Obispo, California, one of the first to approve a gas ban in the country, and her experience was wild.

Heidi Harmon: So the city of Berkeley had been the only city, I think, that had gone before us and they had created a ban and we created a slightly different pathway, but basically it eliminated methane gas in new developments.

[Music]

Heidi Harmon: So the gas union and then So Cal Gas were directly involved, but also WSPA, um, Western States Petroleum Association. And they were very hardcore, um, in terms of the misinformation that they were putting out there and really just stoking fear and mistrust — which is so heartbreaking, honestly, for me, you know, as a local legislator. And all this sort of misinformation and toxicity that was brought on by these front groups and by the gas union in particular culminated in the gas union president threatening our community to busload in busloads of angry COVID-positive workers to contaminate the town.

John Biewen: What? I mean....

Amy Westervelt: Yeah, just in case anyone was under the impression that these guys are just going to go quietly into the night. But you know what? That was at the start of the pandemic and it was one of the first of these bans, and already now there are more than 50 gas bans just in California alone.

John Biewen: All of that highlights the importance of actions at the local and state level. There's so much happening. The mostly-gridlocked federal government is by no means the only game in town.

Amy Westervelt: That's true, but I do want to call out a couple of huge elephants in the room, John.

John Biewen: I am ready.

Amy Westervelt: Okay. There are two: nuclear and lithium. Nuclear, as you know, has been very controversial for a long time. And for good reason. No one wants a Chernobyl on their hands. But there's a whole new debate around it because when nuclear plants are shut down, especially if they're not yet at the end of their useful lives, they're generally replaced by coal or gas. A fossil fuel taking over for a zero emissions energy source. So that has a lot of folks in the climate space asking, should we take another look at nuclear, or at least rethink the idea of closing a nuclear power plant as a net win for the environment? It's a *really* fraught conversation. And the Biden Energy Department has put some money into nuclear research and development.

John Biewen: Okay, so that's nuclear. On lithium, we see these reports about shortages of the minerals and metals we need to build batteries for the Electrify Everything future, right. Isn't that what that's about?

Amy Westervelt: It sure is. And this is where changing the power structure, not just the energy source, gets really important. Because so far, people have focused on just the energy source. You know, swapping out coal or gas for electric, solar, wind, things powered by batteries. But if we don't change anything else, then we're going to apply the same extractive, colonial approach to the renewable energy industry as we did to the fossil fuel industry. And unfortunately, we're kind of already seeing that happening. This is almost too on the nose but I happened to be at a Line 3 resistance camp in Minnesota in November reporting a story, and folks there were packing up to head to their next fight: a lithium mine on Indigenous land in Nevada tied to the renewable energy space.

John Biewen: This is where we really need sweeping policy change that would curb extractive behavior, or at least not incentivize it. But even in its most ambitious versions, the Build Back Better Act was never going to be the Green New Deal, was it, Amy? Now everyone's crossing all their fingers and toes that this even weaker version can pass.

Amy Westervelt: Yep. As we're recording this in December 2021, the Build Back Better Act has passed the House but faces the much bigger challenge of getting through the Senate. It remains to be seen whether Senator Joe Manchin will make good on his promise to vote yes on the bill if his colleagues remove certain items. Leah Stokes, the policy expert we heard from earlier, is watching closely for a couple of reasons.

Leah Stokes: I am hoping and thinking and wishing and praying every day that Joe and Joe can meet up and get this bill across the finish line. Yeah, some people ask me, when am I going to take my maternity leave and I say, when Senator Manchin lets me.

[Music]

Amy Westervelt: In August 2021, amidst all this political wrangling, Stokes gave birth to twins.

John Biewen: It always seems to be one step forward, two steps back. Or to be more positive about it, two steps forward, one and a half back — incremental change that might have been up to the challenge thirty years ago, but isn't now.

Amy Westervelt: Exactly. And that's why a lot of people are looking instead to the courts. So we talked last episode about rights of nature cases, but there are some two dozen climate liability cases in the United States right now too, plus half a dozen fraud cases against oil companies for misleading the public on climate. People seem to be filing more of these all the time. Tomorrow Tamara Toles O'Laughlin — she's an

attorney, activist and CEO and President of the Environmental Grantmakers Association — she says the judiciary has often pushed policy farther than the government wants to go.

Tamara Toles O’Laughlin: So it feels like there are, among those different buckets, cases where we are focusing on what's already been lost, what it will cost to fix, what's just to keep the status quo, which isn't good enough for most folks.

Amy Westervelt: Some cases target the government, some the oil and gas companies, some allege fraud, others make liability claims, but all the goals are clear: accountability and new paths forward. But O’Laughlin focuses a broad, intersectional lens on climate that she would like to surface more in policy debates. The Green New Deal pushed that idea mainstream in a big way. In 2019, Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez and Senator Ed Markey released a 14-page resolution that created a framework for what they called The Green New Deal.

Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez at a Green New Deal press conference: And what this resolution is doing is saying, this is our first step. Our first step is to define the problem and define the scope of the solution. And so we're here to say that small incremental policy solutions are not enough. There is

no justice and there is no combating climate change without addressing what has happened to Indigenous communities. That means that there is no fixing our economy without addressing the racial wealth gap. That means that we are not going to transition to renewable energies without also transitioning frontline communities and coal communities into economic opportunity as well. That is what this is about. It is comprehensive. It is thoughtful. It is compassionate and it is extremely economically strategic as well.

John Biewen: Contrary to popular belief, the Green New Deal is not a defined set of policies. It is not a bill. It's a vision and a framework for pulling climate into every realm of federal action. When it was first announced, extreme reactions followed on the right and the establishment left.

Tucker Carlson, Fox News: All right, Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez says her Green New Deal will save the planet. In exchange, we just give up cars and airplanes and rebuild every structure in the United States.

Justin Trudeau, Canadian Prime Minister: It would be basically the end of civilization if 85 percent of the world's and also 85 percent of the U.S.'s energy in the form of coal, oil, and natural gas were phased out over the next ten years.

Reporter at news conference: Are you offended that Speaker Pelosi called this the “green dream.”

Representative Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez: No, I think it is a green dream.

Amy Westervelt: A lot of them seemed to think addressing inequality was some kind of a distraction from climate solutions, rather than central to any effective solution. But when you hear Rhiana Gunn-Wright, an architect of the Green New Deal, explain it, that idea just seems ridiculous. Here she is breaking it down on *Democracy Now!*

Rhiana Gunn-Wright: People like to say, climate change will kill us all, but the truth is climate change will kill some people first. Um, and so there's a moral imperative to make sure that in the green transition, the same people who bear the brunt of our reliance on fossil fuels are not the same people who, the green transition is being built on their backs. So that's one. And then the second is that income inequality and climate change are linked, not only because we have an extractive economy but because there's a growing body of evidence that, especially in rich countries, the higher you have income inequality, the more emissions that you have. The mechanisms are not clear and there's lots of theories about it, but the evidence is clear. And so if you're going to tackle

climate change and tackle it in a way that's sustainable, you have to be talking about inequity. You have to be talking about racial equity as well, because those are drivers, right. Um, and the ways that we think about addressing that is making sure that the policies are cross-cutting.

Amy Westervelt: More recently, an increasing number of people — Tamara Toles O’Laughlin included — have been talking about reparations and defunding the police in the context of equitable climate policy too. And when O’Laughlin talks about climate reparations, she doesn’t limit her vision to the international level. She considers the U.S., too.

John Biewen: We’ll talk more next time about the relationship between climate action and reparations for slavery. But Tamara O’Laughlin points to the “sacrifice zones” this country has long maintained. The fact that a region in this country goes by the name Cancer Alley. That power brokers have decided it’s acceptable to pollute the air and water of some people, and not others.

Tamara Toles O’Laughlin: These things form a parallel because the system of colonialism created alternate laws, alternate systems of liability and then totally obscured the fact that people's labor should be paid in means that they agree to. And so that basic tenet of a contract was totally violated. And in fact, that's even

worse because the future has been compromised. People's present health is destroyed, their future chances of ever achieving health have been destroyed, and their right to work the land, drink clean water, and fresh air and not be subject to death at an earlier age. All of that has been exchanged in a bargain for some services none of these people said they wanted. And so the places where a global loss and damage conversation like, say, at COP, would come up, and a U.S.-based discussion around reparations and climate reparations, is that they're both the subject of what happens when unchecked colonialism cannibalizes the very thing it needs to survive. And those folks are demanding a restitution. So, care and repair.

[Music]

Amy Westervelt: All this overlaps with the movement to defund the police. It's another policy area where even liberals can resist, at least at first, seeing the connection between climate change and something like prisons. O'Laughlin lays it out in terms so simple it's hard to separate them.

Tamara Toles O'Laughlin: If we're going to take on a carceral state, it has to involve an environmental lens because they both come from the same flaw in logic, which is that some people can die so other people have stuff. Some people

become erased, so other people get a pedestal. Some folks have lives that matter so other folks do not. Like, I think all of those things are places where the vast system that we have built of exchanges and capital and resources and who matters and who doesn't, and who has a right to a voice and how far people go under the jail, is pretty similar to the idea that some folks live in places where the water is no good and some people live in places where the air is poor, even though as human beings, we cannot live without either.

[Music]

John Biewen: Listen to the echoes from our early episodes, right, Amy? Our culture of domination in its many forms. The white patriarchal West and its thingification of so many people and of the non-human natural world.

Amy Westervelt: On climate, criminal justice, and every other social justice issue, another debate is growing louder: is it even possible to generate change from within this system? Or do we need to tear it down and start over?

John Biewen: How do you make these changes happen in a society — talking about the U.S. here — that is far from truly functioning as a democracy? And a country in

which our very partial, badly hobbled democratic institutions are under systematic attack and might be gone in a few years, the way things are going? But even with all these barriers to change, when you talk about tearing down the system — speaking for myself, some kind of armed revolution doesn't look very appealing, either.

Amy Westervelt: Yeah, agreed. Listen, I'm a middle-aged mom who'd very much like to pass on any violent revolution or second civil wars that some people seem to be pining for. So, I saw Max Berger, a longtime political campaigner and grassroots organizer, tweeting about this in ways that didn't instantly terrify me, and I wanted to ask him to talk to me about it some more. Berger is a really interesting person because, throughout his career, he's moved between working from inside the system and agitating to replace it. He campaigned for Howard Dean back in the early 2000s, but he also helped organize the Occupy Wall Street movement. He worked on Elizabeth Warren's presidential campaign, but also co-founded Momentum, the activism incubator that birthed the Sunrise Movement.

Max Berger: With that caveat that I'm still early and trying to figure out how to talk about it and think about this stuff....

Amy Westervelt: Max wanted to be clear that he doesn't have a fully baked vision yet of what's next, after acknowledging that there might just be no fixing this system. But it is something that he's starting to think through.

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. You know, you have a significant subset of the population, particularly the white population, although not only, that is really terrified about the transition away from a white majority population to a multiracial majority. And that's happening in the context of world historic inequality, right. So you really do have the conditions for ethno nationalist authoritarian politics, right? Call it fascist, call it ethno-nationalist authoritarian, call it white supremacist, a politics in which there is a significant number of people that are willing to use violence and do not really subscribe to the beliefs that are required of participating in a democracy because they're afraid of losing power within that democracy to other ethnic groups. That's the kind of beginning of my analysis here.

Amy Westervelt: He went on to say that those reactionaries committed to preserving a white supremacist America are not nearly a majority of the country, but they have taken over the Republican Party in the Trump era, and thus maintained and increased their power. That will surprise no one listening to this show.

John Biewen: Two seasons of Scene on Radio — the Seeing White series and The Land That Never Has Been Yet — have documented this and put it in historical context. Both seasons, and for that matter our season on patriarchy, season three, are pretty good precursors to this season that help explain the political moment we're living through.

Amy Westervelt: Berger notes that the Electoral College, in addition to making it possible for the winner of the popular vote to lose the election, effectively allows 25 to 40 percent of the population to govern because of the United States' two-party system.

Max Berger: We are not we're not going to see the multiracial majority have an opportunity to turn its will into law in the next 10 to 15 years. And I think the amount of tension that that will generate will break the political system. I cannot imagine a situation in which the multiracial majority takes that lying down, and I also don't think that the white nationalist plurality is going to become less vociferous in their opposition to a multiracial democracy. Our political system is basically designed as poorly as possible to manage that kind of a demographic transition because the two party system collapses all divisions in society into a zero-sum all-or-nothing competitive existential conflict. And when that gets racialized or ethnicized, it can become dangerous very quickly.

Amy Westervelt: The country is bitterly polarized, and the structure of the U.S. government has what political scientists call “a profusion of veto points.” Meaning it’s just unbelievably difficult for a bill to become a law. That only adds to the tension.

Max Berger: The example I always use is gun control. And, you know, after name-a-massacre, people always ask if this stuff has an 85 percent approval rating, why can't it pass? And the truth of the matter is that very little can pass. Very few laws make it through our system. And you know, there's a stat that the United States is the only system that has a separately elected executive branch that has not, at some point, collapsed into dictatorship. Because in presidential systems with the separately elected executive, what happens is there's a conflict between the President and the Congress. There's some external crisis that requires action and the Congress is incapable of or unwilling to respond, and then the executive takes the authority to do so without the approval of the legislature. And once that is broken, it's very hard to take back. And I think some version of that is more or less inevitable in the next, five years. The way I see it is like, look, we're going to get a new political system. The question is, does it happen before authoritarianism and civil war or after? And I would love for it to be before, you know. As an American, I would love to not have to experience those things.

John Biewen: Well, shit. The scenarios Max is laying out there do cost me sleep sometimes, too.

Amy Westervelt: Yeah, same. I couldn't help but think about the anti-protest laws being passed amidst all that too. And the police shootings. And the incredibly unjust verdicts. Things are really starting to boil over.

John Biewen: The fascism is thick in the air for anyone who's half awake.

Amy Westervelt: But I found talking to Max Berger about this stuff weirdly comforting, although terrifying at the same time. It sort of confirmed everything I've been thinking, and it scares me for the same reason. I mean, talk about an external crisis that requires action that Congress is unwilling to respond to. Hello, climate emergency!

John Biewen: Yeah. Amy, I'm going to ask you the question I know every climate person hates: does anything in this scenario give you hope?

Amy Westervelt: You know I'm all about that post-hope life, John! That also doesn't mean I've gone full doomer. I tend to think of it more as building resolve and resilience. Grit, maybe. We're living through a tough time, there's no denying that. And we need the courage to continue doing what we know is right. Ojibwe attorney and activist Tara Houska really struck me with her thoughts on this front. She talked to me at that resistance camp I mentioned. She runs that camp in Minnesota, and we sat in the car together on a cold day in November.

Tara Houska: If you're out here with a resistance camp and you're growing food and you're creating community, that is very intentional in balance and inclusivity and pushing back against patriarchy into a balance between the masculine and feminine, like a different but actually familiar old way of being with each other. Then you're suddenly labeled as all kinds of things, right? Like, you're labeled as radicals, you're labeled as antithetical to a way of life, right? Like, you're not complying. Like, what's your problem? But those are all pushbacks, right? I think even something like mutual aid is a pushback against an entirely different, a systemic way of dealing with things, which is

Amy Westervelt: Mutual aid is increasingly popular these days. It's just what it sounds like — one group of people assisting another.

Tara Houska: Mutual aid is, you know, a radical act, right? It's a quote-unquote radical act. But it's 'no, I'm going to take what I have, even though it's not very much, and I'm going to try to help as many people as I possibly can and see them as people. I'm going to care about them and I'm not going to look at them as numbers.' It's so critical and important to at least trying to be the people we want to be. Even if we're past the point of no return, don't we want to at least have tried as hard as we could to build the world that we wanted and to be able to give the young people who are coming up the world that they want, which is obviously not the one that's existing, right? Like, they're pushing back really hard

all over the globe. You've got teenagers that are telling grown adults, grown politicians, how to do their jobs. Because they haven't quite gotten to the point of, like, compromising everything.

[Music]

John Biewen: You know, Amy, where Tara ends up there feels like a very nice segue to where we're going in the next episode, our final episode of this series. And that is looking at a change in culture.

Amy Westervelt: Right, because all the progressive policy in the world can't really happen unless people get behind it. And that can't happen without the large-scale social shift that Ken Caldeira was talking about at the start of this episode. So you're going to take us on that journey next time, right, John?

John Biewen: Something like that, yes. And it's a tall order. But yeah. Next time: how do you take on a capitalist, white supremacist, patriarchal, ecologically suicidal society and build a different world? How do we imagine our way to real, *lasting*, repair?

[Music]

Our script editor for Season 5 is Cheryl Devall. Music in this episode by Lili Haydn, Kim Carroll, Chris Westlake, Lesley Barber, Cora Miron, Goodnight Lucas, and Maetar. Music consulting by Joe Augustine of Narrative Music. We post transcripts on our website: sceneonradio.org. Follow us on Facebook and Twitter, @SceneonRadio. Amy's on Twitter, @amywestervelt. The show is distributed by PRX, and comes to you from the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University.

Transcription by Jess Jiang.