

Scene on Radio
Season 5, Episode 2: “To the Victor”
Transcript

Season 5 is supported by you, our listeners, and by the International Women’s Media Foundation.

John Biewen: Amy, some people might ask: What are the *Crusades* doing in a podcast series about the climate crisis?

Amy Westervelt: Yeah, I guess some might. Religious wars a thousand years ago? But ... I mean, violence and domination? One group imposing their will on the world? Makes sense to me, if you’re looking at how we got into this mess. If you’re taking the long view and the cultural view, the Crusades are *definitely* part of the story.

Movie sound, Arn: The Knight Templar: [Sound: music, woman singing, horses’ hooves.]

Priest: You will journey first to Rome, and from there to the Holy Land.

Arn: Father, I....

Monk: You will be a Knight Templar, a soldier in the service of God.

[Movie music: Swelling strings]

John Biewen: That's from a movie that came out in 2007, it's called "Arn: The Knight Templar."

Amy Westervelt: [Laughing] Arn? That's the main character's name?

John Biewen: Yes, Arn. He's a fictional 12th century crusader from Sweden. Five northern European countries financed this production. And I gotta say, I was surprised by how earnest and almost dewy-eyed this film is about the Crusades.

Amy Westervelt: Yeah, wow John, I have to say I missed that one. So much for the radical left film industry that "hates pro-Western values."

John Biewen: The movie, it portrays these European warriors for Christianity as men of great sincerity and honor. Especially Arn.

Amy Westervelt: Well, maybe we shouldn't be *too* cynical. During the Middle Ages in Europe and the Mideast, religion did really dominated life in almost every way.

John Biewen: True. Quick review: Muhammed establishes Islam in the 7th century. Christians and Muslims often live side-by-side in peace, and trade with each other, but eventually the two faiths get into big fights. Mostly over souls and territory.

Amy Westervelt: Right. Church leaders got really sore about Muslim control of the Holy Land. There's one speech that historians often call the starting point for the Crusades. In 1095, Pope Urban the Second, at the Council of Clermont, called for Christians to go and fight.

John Biewen: This is from an account of the Pope's speech.

Pope Urban II, voiceover: All who die by the way, whether by land or by sea, or in battle against the pagans, shall have immediate remission of sins. This I grant them through the power of God with which I am invested. O what a disgrace if such a despised and base race, which worships demons, should conquer a people which has the faith of omnipotent God and is made glorious with the name of Christ!

The movie Arn: The Knight Templar: [Sound: dramatic music, swords drawn.]

Arn: Nowwww!

[Sound: Horses running, music]

John Biewen: With the Crusades, the Christian church really embraced large-scale violence against non-Christians, as it never had before. When Crusaders took Jerusalem from a Muslim caliphate in 1099, after a siege, the Christian victors

slaughtered thousands of Muslims and Jews. Some historians have argued the Crusades show the Roman Empire's influence on early Christianity.

Amy Westervelt: Rome had a habit of launching wars against so-called "barbarians." Christians adopted this and called it "Holy War."

John Biewen: And it wasn't just Muslims or big wars in the Holy Land. During the years of the Crusades, Christian peasants carried out pogroms and massacred Jews in parts of Europe.

Amy Westervelt: It's become pretty common to see the Crusades as an early form of Western imperialism in the Middle East, similar to what would happen centuries later. But some historians say we should be careful about that. The Middle Ages were a different world, they say, and the main motivation was religious fervor, or maybe a desire to win a ticket to heaven. It was *not* mainly about plunder. But then again. In accounts of that speech by Pope Urban the Second, he refers to Europe's limited land, "shut in on all sides by the seas," "too narrow for your large population."

John Biewen: And the Pope then offers this enticing description of the Holy Land.

Pope Urban II, voiceover: Enter upon the road to the Holy Sepulchre; wrest that land from the wicked race, and subject it to yourselves. That land which as the

Scripture says "floweth with milk and honey," was given by God into the possession of the children of Israel. Jerusalem is the navel of the world. The land is fruitful above others, like another paradise of delights.

John Biewen: You do have to like the part about Jerusalem being the world's belly button. And, of course, the fighting over control of the Holy Land continues to this day.

Amy Westervelt: The Crusaders lost Jerusalem in the end. But a couple of centuries later, the age of colonization begins.

[music]

Amy Westervelt: And now we're really getting there. Getting to the point where Western Europe, which would soon call itself the "white" world, starts to break bad in a big way.

[Music: Theme]

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

Amy Westervelt: I'm Amy Westervelt. In this season-long series on the climate crisis, we're exploring how and why humanity went wrong in our relationship with the earth and our fellow living beings. Some cultures, much more than others. Later in the series we'll visit countries that did not create this ecological crisis but are wrestling with its disastrous impact.

John Biewen: This time out, we pick up where we left off in Episode One – in Europe, and now we're gonna get into the second millennium of the Christian era. You'll want to go back and listen to the first episode if you haven't. The story starts there.

Amy Westervelt: We looked at the Book of Genesis. In that creation story, God gives humanity "dominion" over the natural world, telling "man" to "subdue" the earth and "rule over" other creatures. But as we heard, that text didn't lead most Jews or early Christians to ramp up their exploitation of the land or other living things.

John Biewen: Not right away.

Amy Westervelt: Right. So, John, this is where you take up the story. We'll talk on the other side.

John Biewen: Yeah.

John Biewen: In Episode One we talked about “dominion” as a kind of divine permission slip, but one that people in the Bible-believing world didn’t use all that much for more than a millennium. Sure, people exploited the earth in the straightforward sense of the word — they used it to live. They tilled the soil to plant crops. They domesticated and killed animals for food and warmth. They mined some metals. But across much of the world, people did those things before the Book of Genesis came along. More destructive actions by the Christian West, justified by the claim of God-given “dominion,” would come later. Something similar happened with another passage of scripture — another permission slip, you could say. This one from the Gospel, the Christian Bible— those lines in Matthew Chapter 28 often called the Great Commission. Jesus is talking to his followers after he’s risen from the grave.

Jesus, Matthew 28:19, voiceover: Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I commanded you.

John Biewen: “Make disciples,” “baptize,” “teach.” It seems like a stretch to hear in those words: go and conquer non-Christian people, take their land and their gold, enslave them and commit genocide. But Christian nations, led by kings *and the church*, would justify all of that — under the Doctrine of Discovery in the 15th century.

Pope Nicholas V, *Dum Diversas*, voiceover: As we indeed understand from your pious and Christian desire, you intend to subjugate the enemies of Christ....

John Biewen: Pope Nicholas the Fifth wrote this Papal Bull, an official edict, in 1452. Addressed to King Alfonso of Portugal, the letter refers to Saracens, a word for Muslims at the time, but also to other “pagans.” That includes the African people Portuguese royalty have recently begun to kidnap and enslave.

Pope Nicholas V, voiceover: We grant you full and free power ... by this edict, to invade, conquer, fight, subjugate the Saracens and pagans, and other infidels and other enemies of Christ ... and to lead their persons in perpetual servitude....

John Biewen: The decree gives the Portuguese Crown permission to conquer not just *people* who aren't Christian, but also their home territories. Land that isn't already occupied by a Christian kingdom is *terra nullius*, Latin for “nobody's land.” Thus the Doctrine of “Discovery.” Finders keepers. Forty years later, Pope Alexander the Sixth issues the Papal Bull of 1493. Just months after Columbus's first voyage to the “New World,” this one gives Spain and Portugal the go-ahead to colonize the Americas and subjugate their Indigenous peoples. This will happen, the Pope writes, “with the Lord's guidance,” “to the happiness and glory of all Christendom.”

Pope Alexander VI, voiceover: ...and that barbarous nations be overthrown and brought to the faith itself.

[Music]

John Biewen: You'll remember if you heard *Seeing White*, our Season 2 series: the birth of the Atlantic slave trade in the 1400s marks a profound turning point for the West, and for the world. The decision to kidnap and enslave shiploads of African people leads Europeans to invent "race" — Blackness, whiteness, white supremacy — to justify this brutality. At the same time, the move to a burgeoning intercontinental slave-based economy really leverages Europe's shift from feudalism to capitalism. Historians, especially in the Black radical tradition, have long argued that these two huge historical developments — white supremacy and globalized capitalism — really amount to *one* phenomenon: racial capitalism.

Charisse Burden-Stelly: Racial capitalism is the idea that you can't understand capitalist exploitation and the capitalist world economy without understanding the processes of racialization and the forms of racial hierarchy that constitute that system.

John Biewen: That's Charisse Burden-Stelly, who teaches political theory and history at Minnesota's Carleton College, and a visiting scholar at the University of Chicago

when we spoke. What exactly about racial capitalism was new? Most medieval societies featured hierarchies and forms of slavery and economic exploitation. In Europe, feudalism. The nobility controls the land, and peasants work out a meager subsistence while handing over some of the crops they raise. Other societies practiced slavery based on caste, or hauled people away as the spoils of war to do menial work for their individual masters. But Western Europe constructed a large-scale system of racialized slavery to build wealth like the world had never seen.

Charisse Burden-Stelly: As many scholars have pointed out, slavery has been a feature of many societies. But slavery as an economic system and as the foundation of a particular mode of production is something that's unique to, let us say, the 15th century, 16th century onward.

[Music]

John Biewen: Charisse points to the work of historians like Gerald Horne, who traces the shift in Europe, in the late Middle Ages, from systems of domination based on religion to societies built on race — eventually, a Europe defined by whiteness. As we saw in Season 2, whiteness really emerged alongside something else: an explicit, full-throated anti-Blackness.

Charisse Burden-Stelly: It hasn't always been this reduction of Blackness to plunder, and Africa to the Dark Continent, because if you look at like the 12th and 13th centuries, there are positive depictions of African saints. There are particular relations of exchange that are more or less egalitarian. You have places like the Mali empire that are, that actually attract Europeans because of their vast wealth, and there's a whole story about Mansa Musa there

John Biewen: Mansa Musa, the 14th century leader of the Islamic Mali Empire. He was renowned for handing out huge amounts of gold and building great libraries and universities in Timbuktu. The big lie that slave traders start to tell a century after him, about an inferior, "beastly" African race, then spreads across Europe and sticks. This narrative pushes the people not considered "white" into a separate category — people who European elites claim the right to control, subjugate, and exploit. Here's Karl Marx in the 1850s, describing Europe's transition to capitalism:

Karl Marx, voiceover: The discovery of gold and silver in America, the obliteration, enslavement, the burial of the aboriginal population in mines, the beginning of the conquest and looting of the East Indies, the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black skins, signified the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production.

John Biewen: Notice, Marx's description of capitalism's birth includes both the violent exploitation of *people* who were labeled racially Other ... *and* of riches extracted from the earth -- gold and silver, the products of slave plantations.

[Music]

John Biewen: Along with the international slave trade comes the rise of mercantilism, an early kind of capitalism based on the drive for national wealth. Mercantilists believe that to amass more money and power, a nation needs to reach beyond its shores for more and more laboring bodies and raw materials. Burden-Stelly says this idea seemed especially urgent for one soon-to-be global empire.

Charisse Burden-Stelly: Because as we know, England, for example, is a tiny little random island [laughs]. They don't have very many natural resources, and so there's a particular imperative to go and extract resources from other places.

John Biewen: This marriage of national interest and extractive mercantile capitalism takes literal form in England's East India Company, founded in 1600. It will seize and colonize large parts of the Indian subcontinent and East Asia to extract cotton, silk, sugar, tea, spices. Other European powers launch competitors: the Dutch, and later, the French, East India Companies.

Charisse Burden-Stelly: So the logic of capitalism *is* accumulation. And so, when everything is conscripted into that particular goal, then there really are no limitations. There's nothing that's off limits. Everything is to be discovered, to be owned, to be looted and plundered, and then to the victor go the spoils. But then also the whole value system, there's a whole value system that's built up around that particular understanding. And so nature, like racialized others, are to be conquered and dominated and disciplined....

[Music]

Charisse Burden-Stelly: And more and more of our technological innovation is to the end of making that more efficient and more possible.

John Biewen: Technology, of course, was yet another tool of Western expansion and domination. That initial burst of long-distance colonizing, in places like Africa and the Caribbean, depended on Europe's superior weapons: better swords and guns, ocean-worthy ships with long-range cannons. But scholar Kate Rigby, who we heard from in the last episode, points to the following century, and the much bigger flurry of invention and discovery.

Kate Rigby: I think that the real break is actually with the Scientific Revolution, it's actually in the 17th century.

John Biewen: She says that's when elite Western thinkers really articulated humanity's rupture from the rest of nature, and our dominion over it.

Kate Rigby: I don't say this because I'm down on science. You know, I mean, science is amazing, science is fantastic. But the cultural context within which the project of science was framed was one in which key figures—Bacon, Descartes—took a really aggressively human-chauvinist view.

John Biewen: The Frenchman, Descartes, wrote in 1637 that humans should use science to make ourselves “the masters and possessors of nature.” Then there's Bacon, the English philosopher and government official often called the founder of the scientific method:

Kate Rigby: Who really kind of casts that relationship of dominion in terms of mastery and even enslavement. And he says through science, through knowledge, humans will gain their God-given power, their mastery that will extend throughout the universe.

John Biewen: Bacon wrote that nature could be seen most clearly “under constraint and vexed” ... “by the art and hand of man.”

Kate Rigby: Nature does not give up her secrets readily and has to be forced to give up her secrets. And this, I think this would have been *horrendous* for, certainly for Basil, would be absolutely, would just have thought it was appalling! This was a whole new way of looking at nature.

[Music]

John Biewen: Remember, Basil is the 4th-century Bishop and theologian who wrote rapturously about nature. Francis Bacon has defenders. Elsewhere he writes with deep respect for nature, and some scholars argue he wanted people to use science to build a better society — even to somehow reclaim the Garden of Eden. But many of Europe’s early-modern thinkers did seem to pull out that old permission slip from the book of Genesis, dominion, and give it a new stamp of approval — just as Westerners were inventing new tools for wielding that dominion. Another hugely influential English philosopher, John Locke, wrote in 1690, “God ... hath given the world to men ... to make use of it to the best advantage of life and convenience.” He said land that people didn’t use, they wasted. By way of example Locke referred to “the wild woods and uncultivated waste of America.”

[Music fades out]

[Break]

John Biewen: With racial capitalism, Europe's ruling classes seem to pull together these cultural spare parts from the recent and distant past: the brutal exploitation of the inferior race. The conquest of the infidel. Patriarchy. Dominion over the earth and its non-human creatures. They build a dominant and dominating culture, devoted above all to extracting and accumulating. Things. Wealth. Power. Moving into the 1600s and beyond, increasingly potent, and destructive, technology fuels this drive. For centuries, the prevailing view about this history, among those of us in the wealthy West, has been, well ... *yeah?*

Laura Ingraham: People would argue that the whole world—and I would—that the whole world has been reshaped by people taking other people's land. I mean, it's called conquest, I mean....

John Biewen: Laura Ingraham of Fox News summing up this perspective on her podcast in 2019.

Laura Ingraham: I mean, that's just the way the world is.

John Biewen: It's not just white nationalist commentators. Some scholars, too, say what set the West apart was not a culture of avarice and estrangement from the rest of nature. Maybe it was all just an accident of geography that led to the technology gap,

and the rest was inevitable. That's roughly the argument geographer and historian Jared Diamond made in his acclaimed book of the 1990s, *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, which became a National Geographic and PBS film series in 2005. [Film music] Diamond said nutritious grains that were native to the places where early Western people lived made it easier for them to stockpile food.

Jared Diamond, "Guns, Germs, and Steel" documentary: People who remained hunter-gatherers couldn't produce anywhere near as much food as farmers, and also couldn't produce much food that could be stored. They were always going to be at a chronic disadvantage.

John Biewen: Diamond argued their access to better crops helped some cultures build more specialized civilizations, where some people had the time and the materials to invent things, like more effective swords and guns. So, those societies, and especially European kingdoms, eventually became imperial, conquering powers, extracting wealth from the earth, *because they could*. They were just the first to figure out how to do it. But if the implication is that others would have done the same, Charisse Burden-Stelly says that's a huge assumption to make about all human cultures. Is it true of those rich civilizations of pre-colonial West Africa?

Charisse Burden-Stelly: So for example if the Songhai Empire, for example, had developed, had been more technologically advanced, there's nothing to say

that they necessarily would have spent all of their technological and scientific resources on weapons and on navigating to go and dominate other lands. So that's the ethical dimension of it. It's not only the "genius" of Europeans, especially, you know, the Portuguese and Spanish and British at that time, but also the objective.

[Music]

John Biewen: The objective, the motive, the impulse. The collective decision that *this is a valuable thing to do*. That's not just about having the means. Isn't it about culture, too?

John Biewen: In other words, let me put it this way: if Indigenous people in North America and South America, if somebody had presented them with the opportunity, 'Hey, look, you can get on ships and you can go dominate other people and you can take their land and you can exploit their natural resources,' would they have done that?

Enrique Salmón: Yeah, that's a good question. You know, we don't know for sure, we will never know for sure at this point.

John Biewen: This is Enrique Salmón.

Enrique Salmón: I'm over here in San Leandro, California. This is in the Bay Area, south of Oakland. It's in Chochenyo Ohlone country. I am Rarámuri. We are one of the largest indigenous tribes in North America. It's about seventy thousand of us, located down in Chihuahua, México, in the Sierra Madres.

John Biewen: Salmón teaches American Indian Studies at Cal State University East Bay. He points out, Indigenous peoples in what we call South America were smelting metals, gold and copper, as early as 2000 BCE — mostly to craft religious and ornamental objects.

Enrique Salmón: Why did they not get to that point where they were creating metal weapons and then start to expand their empires that way? We don't know. The Aztecs did create a large empire that subjugated a lot of peoples, and that's one of the more negative examples in the North American continent. But then I look at Anasazi culture in the American Southwest, or what we call Ancestral Puebloans, who had quite the extensive civilization that spread out from the Four Corners region, and chose not to create or develop into this subjugating sort of empire. The reasons for that might have been spiritually based or, you know, kincentrically based, but again....

John Biewen: Enrique used a word that needs explaining: “kincentrically.” “Kin” as in kinship, family. He coined the phrase “Kincentric Ecology” for a scholarly article — exploring how Indigenous people see what he calls “the Human-Nature Relationship.”

Enrique Salmón: It's a relationship based on looking at the natural world around us as a direct relative. If we could do that, as American Indian communities have done for thousands of years, then it directly influences the choices and practices that people make with regards to how we get food.

John Biewen: And in all our interactions with land and non-human creatures. Salmón writes in rich detail about his own people. Given what we've said about the creation story in the Book of Genesis, this jumped out for me: the story of how today's Rarámuri people emerged into the world.

Enrique Salmón: Long story short, you know, there was a huge flood....

John Biewen: The flood wiped out an earlier emergence of the people, except for two children, a boy and a girl. The Creator gave the children seeds and told them to plant the seeds in the damp earth. A plant sprouted, one they hadn't seen before — then, many of these. They grew taller.

Enrique Salmón: As the children were watching one day, they noticed hair was coming out of the top. And then a head popped out, and then a body. And this started happening with all the plants, the new corn plants, or *sunú*. And so today, we owe our emergence to this world through corn. We are children of corn. We literally emerged from ears of corn. And as a result, it's a central part of Rarámuri culture and society. It plays a role in just about everything we do.

John Biewen: Very different from the biblical story of an all-powerful God creating the world from nothing, humans included, and putting us in charge of it all. Enrique says in most Indigenous origin stories, other familiar, earth-bound creatures give birth to humanity.

Enrique Salmón: Not too far east of where I am here, Yokut communities, and they owe their emergence to Eagle and Coyote coming together to create the first people out of the soil from the Central Valley. Up north in the Pacific Northwest, there's stories of Raven playing a role in bringing the first people. I can go on again with all sorts of examples like that, where the natural world played a direct role in bringing people into this world. And as a result, we feel responsible for this continued stewardship of the very thing that brought us here.

[Music]

John Biewen: It's a "responsibility-based" culture. That's another phrase Salmón uses to sum up a "kincentric" relationship to the natural world. In another contrast to the West: remember, even going back to early Christianity, Augustine said animals did not have souls. Enrique says most Indigenous people believe, as he puts it, "everything that breathes has a soul." That includes things that, our science tells us, don't literally breathe — like stones, and the earth. He admits "soul" is just the closest word he can find in English for a spirit that permeates the world in many non-Western cultures.

Enrique Salmón: In our language we refer to it as *iwi*. Folks who have spent time in Hawaii would recognize the word, perhaps, *mana*. Or even people who get into the Star Wars movies, it would be the Force [laughs]. Or another example is, people who study martial arts, Eastern martial arts, you know, there's *chi*. All of these words converge on the same idea that there's this life force that permeates everything. I like to think of it also as breath, because we all need breath. Our breath is the same as the plants, the animals, the rocks, the insects.

[Music]

[Sound: Outside, tractor in distance]

David Pecusa: I planted yellow corn right here. They're like yellow spokes, poking out. They haven't been exposed to the sun so they're still white. So once they get exposed, then they'll start turning green.

John Biewen: David Pecusa, on Hopi Nation, inspecting plants that have just emerged from the sandy soil.

David Pecusa: But if you want to taste this.

[Sound: David chewing sprout]

David Pecusa: In that first shoot, it's like all its nutrients, all what it's gonna be, really condensed, and it's super sweet. All its energy, what it's gonna grow up to be. I could taste its future or something like that [laughing], I could taste its future, what it's gonna be. And when the corn pollen's out, when the corn is pollinating, when you come down in here you can just smell that thick corn, you know, and when you breathe in you can actually taste the sweetness on your tongue. And then that's when I got an insight, I said, ah, that's how they eat, that's how the spirits eat. When they come, they taste it on the air. I could just taste it, and in my mind, that's when I said, ah, I want corn....

[Music]

John Biewen: Amy, David's people, the Hopi, are close cousins of Enrique Salmón's tribe in Mexico, the Rarámuri. And the Hopi are descended from the Ancestral Puebloans that Enrique talked about.

Amy Westervelt: They were the people who had a large civilization going back several thousand years in what's now the southwestern U.S. They traded with other tribal groups but they didn't turn into violent conquerors of other people. And, as we can see from David, the Hopi to this day maintain their deep cultural commitment to caring for the land.

John Biewen: Their "kincentric" relationship to other natural things.

Amy Westervelt: Right, I love that. So, looking at the story you've told so far over these two episodes: It's about an evolving culture in Europe, and it seems to consist of layers adding up over time to bring the West to where we went wrong. So it wasn't *just* the Biblical "dominion" idea. Not *just* patriarchy. Not *just* the colonizing impulse, or white supremacy. But put all that together, stir in a heaping helping of capitalism, and here we are.

John Biewen: Yeah. And, you know, looking at history, it's one thing to say *what* happened. Saying *why* it happened is usually harder, trickier, more subject to debate.

And let's be clear about this, too: nobody is saying the West *invented* violence, hierarchy, slavery, exploitation, and so on.

Amy Westervelt: Of course. Most cultures across human history have done those things, in a rich variety of ways. But it seems undeniable that the Western, self-described “white” world eventually developed a culture that got very, very comfortable justifying its own aggression and dominance. Over just about everyone and everything.

John Biewen: Notice the lines that Westerners drew over time — again, not all of these unique to the West. But lines between men and women. A religious line, Christian and non-Christian. “White” and non-white. Humankind versus the entire natural world that’s “less than” human. *We* are on this side, *you’re* on the other, and we’re somehow more important and we claim the right to control and subjugate you.

Amy Westervelt: Yeah. And all of that is before you even get capitalism, which, yikes. The core idea of capitalism is extracting profit from people’s labor and from so-called “natural resources.” So, a society of zealous capitalists who claim God-given dominion over the earth? That’s pretty much a recipe for ecological disaster.

John Biewen: There is more ground to cover. We haven’t even got fully into the Enlightenment yet, let alone the Industrial Revolution and the whole business with fossil fuels. But one other thing to emphasize for now: we are definitely not saying, and no

one I interviewed is saying this, that there's something *inherently* different about Europeans, or their colonial settler progeny like us here in the U.S.

Amy Westervelt: Yeah.

John Biewen: We're not *innately* acquisitive or domineering.

Amy Westervelt: Right. For one thing, that kind of claim often goes hand-in-hand with racist claims about the "innate" traits of other racial or ethnic groups, and you know we're not trafficking in that stuff.

John Biewen: Right. But the scholar Charisse Burden-Stelly, who studies racial capitalism, points out another reason not to entertain the notion that, well, this is just who we are, through and through.

Charisse Burden-Stelly: Yeah, and I think that when we make essentialist arguments like "white Europeans are that way," we kind of let them off the hook in the sense that we don't really name the ways in which these processes are ongoing. Right? That these things are, these are choices and ethics and epistemologies and politics that are being chosen every day. And that all our alternative systems are being attacked because of the ongoing choices of the few that rule.

Amy Westervelt: She mentions “alternative systems being attacked.” And as we said, we called this series “The Repair” because we want to explore what it would take to save ourselves, especially those of us in countries like the U.S. that did *create* this ecological crisis. And let’s be clear: per capita, we in the U.S. are still at or near the top as emitters of greenhouse gases. We’re also the most responsible for historical emissions, which is what is causing climate change now.

John Biewen: Yes.

Amy Westervelt: So, if we’re trying to get to solutions, what’s the takeaway from this episode? Do we need to be more like David Pecusa? Is that really possible for people who aren’t grounded in a deep spiritual tradition like that of the Hopi people?

John Biewen: It’s a fair question. When he talks about the spirits eating corn pollen they taste in the air, not everyone can easily relate to that. But up until just a few hundred years ago, pretty much all cultures saw the earth and the natural world as sacred, a web of spirits. Much of humanity still does. Not just Indigenous folks here in the Americas, but think of Taoism in China. Shinto, the older Japanese religion with its many kami, or gods, permeating the earth.

Amy Westervelt: Hinduism. The animistic religions of Africa. And you know, even a word like “animism” could only be coined in a modern, Western world, after the Scientific Revolution, to describe “other,” “different” cultural traditions. People who believe that spirits reside in everything would never think to say, “I have an animistic understanding of the world.”

John Biewen: Right.

Amy Westervelt: It's just *the world*.

John Biewen: And as we've said, pre-Christian Europeans held similar beliefs. And it's certainly possible within *Christianity* to revere the natural world and want to protect and care for it. But one way of stating what happened in the West is that Europeans, on the whole, gradually convinced themselves that the earth and its creatures were *not* sacred.

Amy Westervelt: Right. Stones aren't alive, they're just rocks. Soil is just dirt. Animals, if they're not pets, are potential meat.

John Biewen: The non-human world doesn't have value in itself, and for that matter, neither do humans who don't look like me. The value of anything, really, is in what it can do for me.

Amy Westervelt: And to see that that belief is wrong-headed and leads to terrible consequences, you don't have to be an Indigenous person. You don't have to be deeply grounded in what Enrique Salmón calls a "kincentric" understanding of ecology. Grasping that truth is entirely consistent with a secular, science-based understanding. If your science isn't skewed by these false, artificial lines that people drew over the centuries. All you have to do is look around. Everything is connected.

John Biewen: And anyway, we all come from people who thoroughly understood they were living creatures among other living creatures. People who knew their lives depended on the health of the world around them.

Amy Westervelt: So. Can enough of us relearn and reclaim that truth in time. To demand the transformations required to save ourselves and our planet.

[Music]

John Biewen: Next time, Amy continues our story with a look at what the Enlightenment injected into this mix of white supremacy, patriarchy, and capitalism. And how that shaped the way Americans, in particular, view the natural world.

[Music]

John Biewen: Our story editor this season is Cheryl Devall. Music by Lili Haydn, Chris Westlake, Kim Carroll, Cora Miron, Alex Weston, Lesley Barber, and Fabian Almazan. Music consulting by Joe Augustine of Narrative Music. Voiceovers by Jean-Christian Rostagni, Lawrence Baldine, Scott Huler, and Dirk Philipsen. Again, my recording of David Pecusa was for a 2009 public radio series, Five Farms, which you can find at fivefarms.com. The executive producer of that project was Wesley Horner. Follow us on social media — @sceneonradio on Twitter and Facebook. Amy’s Twitter handle is @amywestervelt. Our website is sceneonradio.org. Scene on Radio is distributed by PRX. The show comes to you from the Center for Documentary Studies at Duke University.

Transcription by Jess Jiang.