

Derrick Jensen (b. 1960) is an author and environmental activist. His work centers on questions and criticisms of contemporary society and its values. He holds degrees in Mineral Engineering Physics and Creative Writing. He teaches creative writing at Pelican Bay State Prison and Eastern Washington University. In *The Culture of Make Believe* (2004), Jensen grapples with, among other things, the “central organizing feature of our culture” which he argues is property. He considers how participation in systems of inequality and injustice are legitimized, normalized, and made invisible by cultural beliefs and values.

## The Culture of Make Believe

Derrick Jensen

### Uncovering

In 1823, U.S. Supreme Court chief justice John Marshall wrote a decision remarkable for its candor about a subject we would all generally prefer not to acknowledge: The means by which the United States government, and more broadly Euroamerican culture, took possession of this continent. By now there can be few who still believe the continent was empty when the Pilgrims and other colonists landed here, or that, for whatever reason, the original inhabitants – the Indians – held no prior claim to the land. To this day, the federal government admits that 33 percent of the land mass of the continental United States was never ceded by treaty, and, therefore, is held illegally. How, then, does the government, and, once, again more broadly, do we nonnatives, justify possession of this land?

Here’s what Marshall had to say about it. In a case called *Johnson v. M’Intosh*, Marshall declared that “discovery gave title ... which title might be consummated by possession.” He reasoned, “However extravagant the pretension of converting the discovery of an inhabited country into conquest may appear; if the principle has been asserted in the first instance, and afterwards sustained; if a country has been acquired and held under it; if the property of the great mass of the community originates in it, it becomes the law of the land, and cannot be questioned.” Translation: If conquest forms the basis for your community – if your community would simply not exist without it, *conquest cannot be questioned*.

He was explicit: “However this ... may be opposed to natural rights, and to the usages of civilized nations, yet, if it be indispensable to that system under which the country has been settled, and be adapted to the actual condition of the two people, it may, perhaps, be supported by reason, and certainly cannot be rejected by Courts of justice.” He also said, “Conquest gives a title which the Courts of the conqueror cannot deny, whatever the private and speculative opinions of individuals may be.” Let us translate this as well: If an entire system is based upon an injustice, the Supreme Court can do no other than to codify this injustice into law. To translate it further, and perform a perhaps forgivable anachronism: To kill one Indian may or may not be a “hate crime”; to dispossess an

entire culture may “be supported by reason, and certainly cannot be rejected by Courts of justice.” ...

### Utility

Consider a diamond. The majority of people in the United States own at least one. Few of them realize that nearly all these stones were supplied by one company – DeBeers. Even fewer are aware that the laws of apartheid were drafted and implemented at the request of, and explicitly to serve, DeBeers and related mining companies.

Prior to the arrival of Europeans, southern Africa was home to stable, functioning, ancient human communities. These included the San, who, along with their evolutionary predecessors, had probably been in the region for nearly two million years, the longest any human culture has existed in one place; the Khoikhoi, pejoratively labeled Hottentots by Dutch settlers; and a wide-ranging and intermingled group of cultures united by their use of the Bantu family of languages.

It’s hard to say whether the actions of European explorers and settlers read more like a bad dream or like a replay of European explorers and settlers everywhere. Probably both. They came, they saw, they conquered, and they did not question their right to do so. The Dutch East India Company established a post near modern Cape Town, then expanded it year by year. When displaced Khoikhoi asked, according to the post’s commander, Jan Van Riebeeck, “whether, if they were to come into Holland, they would be permitted to act in a similar manner,” Van Riebeeck stated, presaging Marshall by some hundred and sixty years, that the country had been “justly won by the sword in defensive warfare, and that it was now our intention to retain it.” If the Khoikhoi continued to complain, he said, “they would lose still more of their land by the right of conquest, unless indeed they had the courage to expel us.” The Khoikhoi were driven off their land, enslaved, and, ultimately, exterminated. The San, too, were driven off their land. The Bantu? That’s where diamonds come into play.

But before we get to diamonds, we need to be clear about one thing. From the perspective of the perpetrators – from inside the system of thought that gave rise to apartheid – nothing that’s been done to these people has been motivated primarily by hatred or racism. None of it would be understood as a hate crime perpetrated by a hate group. Indeed, apartheid wasn’t a crime: it was *the law*.

Instead of hate, the motivation for the treatment of the Africans could have been territorial expansion. It could have been progress. It most certainly could have been economic production. It could have been that the laws of apartheid were actually implemented to help the natives: as Governor Harry Smith told native chiefs, whom he routinely forced to kiss his feet at bayonet point, “You may no longer be naked and wicked barbarians, which

you will ever be unless you labour and become industrious. ... You must learn it is money that makes people rich by work."

Or it could be that the laws of apartheid were simply deemed necessary, no questions asked. So long as vision remains constricted, hatred can often remain invisible from the inside.

Now, to diamonds. Diamonds were discovered in South Africa in 1867, precipitating a rush that by 1871 made South Africa the world's largest supplier. Mines could only be owned by whites, and were worked almost exclusively by blacks. Because labor was by far the greatest expense of owning a mine, a free market in labor could have driven up wages – catastrophe for mine owners – which meant workers needed to be restricted. Thus were enacted the first of the infamous Pass Laws of apartheid, these prohibiting native movement after 8:00pm, and requiring, under threat of flogging, all native workers to carry signed passes to be shown at any time "to anyone who may demand it." The laws were passed not from any overt hatred, but for reasons of economy. We'll find that this was true at each step of apartheid's implementation.

Employers were concerned about theft of diamonds, and in any case, the Pass Laws didn't suffice to prevent a free market in labor, so African workers began to be confined to company "compounds" for the duration of their employment, a practice originating with the use of convict labor that continues to this day. Workers were separated from their families, and from all other outsiders, for the yearlong duration of their contract. Exceptions to the rule of noncontact were made for missionaries, who were "enjoined to impress upon the native mind two simple Christian precepts – the virtue of obedience and the dignity of labour."

Gold has been at least as important as diamonds to the South African economy, and to the creation of apartheid. Gold deposits were found in South Africa in 1868, but modern South African gold mining really began with the discovery of the main gold-bearing formation at Witwatersrand in 1886. The monopolistic mineowners, who also owned the diamond mines, faced the same need in both sectors: cheap labor.

A South African mining official asked, "Is there any way short of compulsion to make him [an African] go to a mine? – Not one that I know of. He would have to be compelled? – We might achieve it by paying a very high rate, but that would ... defeat the object we have in view." Not only that, but according to the Director of Native Labour, "To make him an entirely free agent as a labourer ... would certainly cause industrial dislocation and jeopardise the economic prosperity of the country."

If your community is founded on an injustice, that injustice cannot be questioned.

Most natives lived off the land, and thus did not need to sell their labor. To force them off the land and into the mines, the government (made up of the mineowners and others like them) passed poll, hut, and even dog taxes. Because the natives had not previously been part of a cash economy, they had to go into mines to earn money to pay taxes.

More laws followed, passed, still and always, of course, not out of hatred, but compassion. The purpose of the laws, according to Cecil Rhodes, prime minister of South Africa and owner of DeBeers and other mining concerns, was to "remove these poor children out of their state of sloth and laziness, and give them some gentle stimulants to go forth and find out something of the dignity of labour." To this end he introduced a Masters and Servants Bill, giving white employers the right to beat their nonwhite employees. The bill became popularly known as the Every-Man-to-Wallop-His-Own-Nigger Bill. He later passed the Glen Grey Act in the Cape, which imposed taxes, replaced communal with individual land ownership, and forced Africans to follow rules of inheritance guaranteeing that all but one member of every family would be made landless. Additional Masters and Servants Laws prohibited Africans from breaking their contracts, no matter how harsh the working conditions. Nothing in the Masters and Servants Laws, however, prohibited death from breaking the contracts: Death rates in the mines ran between 8 and 10 per cent per year, translating to 8,000-10,000 human beings killed in the mines just in 1899 (around twenty-five per day).

Thus the final pieces of the apartheid puzzle fell into place during the first two decades of the twentieth century: dispossession, decimation of communal social structures, and racial segregation on a national scale. What the mines needed at this point, according to the president of the Chamber of Mines, was "a policy that would establish once and for all that outside special reserves, the ownership of the land must be in the hands of the white race, and that the surplus of young men, instead of squatting on the land in idleness and spreading out over unlimited areas, must earn their living by working for a wage, as every white man who is not a land-owner must do."

The mines got the workers they needed. ...

### **Invisibility**

... I just got off the phone with my friend John Keeble. He is an extraordinary novelist and thinker, and the author of an excellent novel about the murky and unacknowledged relationship between transnational corporations and hate groups. "It's not that corporations always funnel money to hate groups," he said, "although that does happen." His voice was thoughtful and slow, resonant, with always a slight hesitation before speaking, as though checking his sentence one last time before sending it into the world. He

continued, "The connection between Henry Ford and fascism is well known. I think the same is true of Joe Coors. Rupert Murdoch. And of course in the Third World – in the colonies – transnationals routinely support death squads and vice versa."

I thought of the words of Ogoni activist Ken Saro-Wiwa in 1994: They are going to arrest us all and execute us for Shell. Saro-Wiwa said this after reading a leaked Nigerian military memo that stated, "Shell operations still impossible unless ruthless military operations are undertaken for smooth economic activities to commence." It went on to recommend that soldiers begin "wasting" Ogoni leaders, "especially vocal individuals," and concluded by recommending pressure on oil companies for "prompt, regular" payments to support the cost of military operations. Four days after this memo was written, four traditional Ogoni leaders were murdered by a mob at a rally, and although Saro-Wiwa was in military custody at the time, nine months later he was charged with inciting the riot. He was executed. After this, I thought of another memo, this one written by a spokesperson for Shell Nigeria: "For a commercial company trying to make investments, you need a stable environment; dictatorships can give you that." And I thought also of something else Ken Saro-Wiwa had said. "Human life does not mean much to those who have benefited from the oil."

I thought of Weyerhaeuser, the first company to sign contracts with the military dictatorship in Indonesia, and of the use of the Indonesian military to support Freeport McMoRan. Occidental Petroleum in Columbia, where, as I write this, 5,000 U.S.-backed troops are marching into U'Wa territory to force the U'Was to accept more oil wells on their homeland. Dictatorships and transnationals. Hand in glove.

"But that's not the connection that interests me the most," John said.

There was that hesitation, and, had I not known him so well, I would have asked what he meant. But I knew to wait.

He said, "They're cousins."

I just listened.

"Nobody talks about this," he said, "but they're branches from the same tree, different forms of the same cultural imperative. ..."

"Which is?"

"To rob the world of its subjectivity."

"Wait –" I said.

"Or to put this another way," he continued, "to turn everyone and everything into objects."

Again he paused, before he said, "The methodology used by each is different. Corporations are carriers of ruin, turning everything they touch to money. They are culturally sanctified, supported, and protected in their role of turning the living – forests, oceans, mountains, rivers, human lives – into the dead: money. And because they are culturally sanctified they get to act aboveground."

"And hate groups?"

"Beneath, hidden, hated. But serving that same function of objectifying. Their entire self-definition is based on this objectification." He paused. "Of course that's true for corporations as well, in a different way."

Neither of us spoke, until finally he returned to the subject of hate groups. "I can hate another person because of who he is without denying his individuality. But if I hate a person *because* she's black, or an Indian, or a Jew, or a woman, or a homosexual, I'm not even giving her the honor of hating her in particular. I'm hating a stereotype that I'm projecting onto her."

That movement toward depriving others of their subjectivity, I thought, is *the* central movement of our culture. Many Indians have told me that the most basic difference between Western and indigenous ways of being is that Westerners view the world as dead, and not as filled with speaking, thinking, feeling subjects as worthy and valuable as themselves.

I asked him why he's spent so long – a decade, nearly 20 percent of his life – studying both hate groups and big oil. He said, "They provide fingerholds by which we can pry our way in, gain access to the hidden workings of our culture. The way big oil provides the fingerhold should be pretty clear. Each individual member of an oil company may not intend to commit a hate crime. They are merely attempting to maximize profits, and in so doing they talk themselves into committing the most horrible of atrocities. That brings us to hate groups. Hate groups state openly that they're racist and afraid. We're all racist, and we're all afraid. It's just that most of us are afraid to admit it. This means we all get to hate the hate groups, for their heavy-handed, comic-book propaganda, and especially for the hatred that is there in the culture, but which we cannot acknowledge." He paused, then continued, "And that's too bad, because a threat unacknowledged is ultimately – on a bone level – far more disturbing than an acknowledged and understood threat. Of course it's also more dangerous. This is true whether we're talking about something as simple, and as easy to fix, as a broken staircase, or something as convoluted and confusing as an abusive family, or an abusive culture."

### Property

... Like many children of my generation, my introduction to chimney sweeps was the lucky lads in *Mary Poppins*, who smiled through the soot as they danced across the

rooftops with Dick Van Dyke: “Good luck will rub off,” they sang, “if you shakes hands with me.” The movie came out in 1964, when I was three, by which age – had I been born in a different time and place – I would nearly have been old enough to begin work as a “human broom,” as sweeps were sometimes called. I didn’t actually see the movie, though, until I was nine or ten, and even though I was a child, I would, by this time, have been nearly too old for the trade.

Real chimney sweeps did not dance. They climbed the insides of flues twelve by fourteen inches or smaller, and scrubbed or brushed away the soot by hand. Young and tiny children were especially useful because they could get into smaller places, leading to the popular advertising slogan “Little boys for small flues.”

England abolished slavery in 1808, which means that the children who were chimney sweeps were not chattel slaves, as such. But an early-nineteenth-century investigation could not discover even a single child who had voluntarily entered the trade. They were all either orphans or indigents sold by parish workhouses to masters of sweeps, children of famished parents sold to same, or kidnap victims. Because land was dear and children cheap, the going rate to purchase a child ranged from a few shillings to two guineas – “the smaller the child, the better the price,” for obvious reasons. One field hand in the American South cost as much as several hundred of the “climber boys.”

It wasn’t merely that sweeps did not dance, but most of them could not, even if they’d wanted to. Employers kept them malnourished so they could fit inside the chimneys (and, in any case, were not responsible for the boys’ food – these children not being chattel – meaning the boys had to beg). Enough boys developed malignant tumors on their scrotums – from malnutrition and constant exposure to so much soot that it lodged in significant quantities in the folds of skin covering the scrotum – for the tumors to gain the name “chimney sweep’s cancer.” Crippling injuries and deformities were common. Because the children were expendable – I mean this word precisely – they were often sent to clean even hot flues: The children’s safety and well-being were worth even less than heated meals served at the proper time. Climber boys who hesitated to ascend hot chimneys were beaten, or if they ascended partway and started back down, had straw lit beneath them to force them up. These practices were routine. As historian Georgina Battiscombe wrote, “Forced screaming and sobbing up dark, narrow chimneys, their skin scorched and lacerated, their eyes and throats filled with soot, these small children – Ashley found a child of four-and-a-half working as a climbing boy – faced suffocation in the blackness of a chimney or perhaps a slow and painful death from cancer of the scrotum, the climbing-boys’ occupational disease.”

In 1828, Joseph Glass improved the design of a chimney-cleaning machine invented some years earlier. The machine could cheaply and efficiently clean flues of any size or design, and cost only four pounds. But boys were cheaper, so for many years they continued in common use.

Property is the central organizing feature of our culture. The protection or sanctity of private property – or at least the private property of those in power – informs nearly every decision made by the rulers, and certainly informs the great moral debates of recent history. The question of property was central, of course, to the slave debates of the 1840s and 1850s. In his classic study, *Abolition of Negro Slavery*, Professor of Political Law Thomas Roderick Dew used as his first argument against emancipation, “We take it for granted that the right of the owner to his slave is to be respected, and consequently that he is not required to emancipate him, unless his full value is paid by the state.” In *his* defense of slavery, William Harper begins a description of a hypothetical utopia with the phrase, “Let us suppose a state of society in which all shall have property. ...” The point is that slaves were property – no more and certainly no less – and a nearly insurmountable philosophical, political, and practical difficulty in even *talking* about their emancipation was the enormous cost of compensating the traffickers in humans for their property. Dew threw out a figure of \$100 million in 1832 dollars for the slaves in just Virginia, which compares far too closely with the assessed value of all of the houses and lands in that state at the time: \$206 million. In all of the debate, even the most fervent abolitionists objected merely to humans as property: It was as unthinkable then as it is now to discuss the morality of property itself.

Property has *always* been the central consideration of the United States government, but it has become even more so over time. Between the signing of the Declaration of Independence in 1776, to provide just one obvious, and, in some ways, silly, example (silly because all of the terms are seemingly obvious, yet in fact nearly impossible to adequately define) and the passage of the Fourteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution in 1868, the inalienable rights with which men [*sic*] are self-evidently endowed by their Creator, and which may not be abridged by the State, changed from “Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness,” to life, liberty, and property. The Fourteenth Amendment, passed during the KKK’s maiden reign of terror, ostensibly to protect the rights of blacks from racist state governments, has been used far more often to protect the rights to property: Of the Fourteenth Amendment cases brought before the Supreme Court between 1890 and 1910, only nineteen dealt with the rights of blacks, while two hundred and eighty-eight dealt with the rights of corporations.

On the other side of the Atlantic, private property even informed something so open-and-shut as the debates

about the safety of chimney sweeps in England: Attempts to mandate larger flues to facilitate their cleaning by adults or machines were rejected for decades on the grounds that, in the words of Lord Sydney Smith, one of those opposing the mandate, they “could not be carried into execution without great injury to property.” Smith said this after listing five pages of horrors inflicted upon climber boys, and was explicit that the essential reason for opposing the mandate was that property is worth more than life, stating that “it was quite right to throw out the bill for prohibiting the sweeping of chimneys by boys – because humanity is a modern invention; and there are many chimneys in old houses which cannot possibly be swept in any other manner.” Influential economist David Ricardo consistently and steadfastly refused to speak out in favor of the climbing boys (although he spoke out on nearly every subject related to the economy); the reason can be inferred from the premise constant in his writings, which is that legislature (including that which was charged with protecting child laborers) must not be allowed to infringe on the rights of property owners.

I have two questions. The first has to do with David Ricardo. In graduate school I studied economics. My macroeconomics textbook listed Ricardo as one of the three most important classical economists (his work, along with Adam Smith’s and John Stuart Mills’s, “dominated” the period). Here’s the first question: What sort of a culture would value the thoughts of someone who perceives property rights as more important than the health and safety of children (or of anyone, for that matter), and most especially, what sort of a culture would value this person’s thoughts highly enough to continue to teach them (with no mention of their inhumanity) a couple of hundred years later? And what sort of culture would enact policies that produce this sort of inhumanity?

Here’s the other question. Why am I exploring the notion of private property? What is the relationship, if any, between the sanctity of private property and hate, contempt, disregard? For simplicity’s sake, let’s call it hate. I keep asking myself why this discussion of hate seems to lead me toward property. On one hand, it seems absurd. Hate is an emotion. The sanctity of private property is a belief system. End of discussion. No connection. But there is something there. The flayed cat. The chimney sweeps. The Middle Passage. Each of these horrors occurs because people – the owners and their employees – value money, value property, over living beings. But that still doesn’t quite explain the relationship between these atrocities and hate.

Or does it? Is this a case of hatred – hatred of life itself, perhaps? – having been felt long enough that it no longer feels like hate, but tradition – in this case the sanctity of private property?

So far I’ve held a straight face while writing about democracy – and the good things in life – as they are made possible for the owning class through the efforts of the enslaved, and I’ve been quoting without disagreement defenders of this politics of luxury. But maybe now it’s time to begin asking some more fundamental questions. What sort of democracy can be based explicitly on the misery of others? And what sort of people would desire and claim a luxury which has as its cost the hopes and lives of a race of slaves? I include myself in this question, as I sit now in front of my computer made in Thailand, wearing a sweatshirt and a sweater made in sweatshops in Korea (at least the shirt I’m wearing today was made in the United States by a company that does not overly exploit its workers). I don’t *feel* like I hate the workers in Thailand and Korea. Truth be told, I feel nothing toward them. I don’t even know who they are. How, then, do I support their suffering, and, in the case of the workers in Thailand, their deaths? It’s too easy for me to simply blame it all on our economic system, or to call that system one current in the cultural river of hate. It’s too sanctimonious to invoke the defense of the good Germans: I did not know, and to the degree that I did, I was merely following orders. Or just getting along.

The problem isn’t property and ownership as such. You don’t have to own people to misuse them. All you have to do is see them as means to ends, to see the world through the lens of utilitarianism, or instrumentality, as John Keeble averred when he said that corporations and hate groups are branches from the same tree, different forms of the same cultural imperative: to rob the world of its subjectivity, to turn everyone and everything into objects.

Here’s one last question in this chapter of many questions. Does someone who objectifies, one who perceives the living planet and its members as objects to be used, hate the world, and hate life? Or is it more true that for these people the world (or children, or blacks, or women, or whatever category they or we wish to objectify) simply doesn’t exist? I have to admit that it seems like a stretch to say that those who objectify the world hate life, but given that our culture clearly objectifies the world, and given that it is rapidly destroying life on the planet, maybe it’s time to stretch.

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