

WARD  
CHURCHILL  
ON  
MANIFEST  
DESTINY

*interviewed by Derrick Jensen*

## Ward Churchill

Prior to the arrival of Europeans, an estimated 12 million human beings lived within the present borders of the United States. In 1890, when the federal government declared the “Indian wars” to be officially over, the native population was less than 250,000—a little over 2 percent of what it had been four hundred years earlier. And the genocide against indigenous peoples continues unabated to this day.

One author who has explored the genocide extensively is Ward Churchill. In his work, Churchill makes the connections between the direct destruction of a people, the appropriation of their land, and the more insidious roles played by literature and other forms of culture in the committing of genocide. How does genocide continue to this day, both in the United States and across the world? How do assimilation, ideology, and even such seemingly harmless actions as the dominant culture’s appropriation of Indian spirituality relate to questions of Indian identity and, ultimately, existence?

Churchill’s numerous books include *Fantasies of the Master Race: Essays on Literature, Cinema, and the Colonization of American Indians*; *Struggle for the Land: Indigenous Resistance to Genocide, Ecocide and Expropriation in Contemporary America*; and *Indians R Us?: Culture and Genocide in Native North America*.

## Ward Churchill

Derrick Jensen: You’re the first person I’ve seen make the explicit connection between Manifest Destiny and the lebensraum policy of the Third Reich.

Ward Churchill: Actually, the first person I’m aware of to make that connection was Adolf Hitler. He stated clearly in *Mein Kampf* that he did not take any of the old empires of Europe as the model for what he saw as the destiny of the German people. Rather, he took the Nordic population, as he called it, of North America, who had had the “strength of will” to exterminate an “inferior” people and put their land to its own use, making of itself in fairly short order a continental power capable of projecting a global influence on the course of events.

The only way for the German people to fulfill what he saw as their destiny was to expand into areas occupied by inferior peoples. With the exception of the Jewish and Gypsy populations, which were not particularly endowed with landholdings at the time, the most inferior group in sight, in his estimation, were the Slavic peoples. He therefore articulated a drive by Germany from west to east in direct correspondence to what he perceived as the history of the Nordic drive in North America from east to west. The nazis were pushing in the opposite direction but for the same purposes, from the same philosophical perspective—a matter Hitler made quite clear—and utilizing much the same methods that he discerned as having been employed in North America.

you have to be willing to call what's being done by its right name.

The dominant culture—the colonized mind—is at war with nature, and so by definition is at war with all peoples of nature. The more natural the people, the greater the degree of hostility the dominant culture manifests toward them.

This is an alienation from nature so profound and so virulent that no one in the dominant flow of things wants to acknowledge that it even exists. There is the normal and correct ordering of consciousness to relate to the world, they say, they assert, they insist. So long as they look at it that way, there can be no admission of pathology. It follows that, absent an acknowledgment of the pathology, there can be no cure.

What's necessary is for people to come to grips with the fact that there is something radically wrong with the tradition into which they've been conditioned, and for these people to want to get out of that.

This may seem unlikely, but I want to stress that it is possible. Nothing human is impossible, at least in terms of human interactions and relations. There's nothing preordained or "immutable." We're not dealing with glaciation or some other geologic process here. What's at issue is the result of choices, often conscious choices, made by human beings.

So it's all possible. None of it is—as the dominant culture contends—"unrealistic." If it's possible it's also realistic. If you let that which oppresses you define what's real, you will always be oppressed. Define a different reality, one which makes more sense, and go after it.

This is about the notion of a given people defining itself as being invested with a superior right to the use of land belonging to people they concomitantly define as inferior. In part this second group is to be completely displaced from the land, which will be put to "better" use by the self-defined superior group. If there is nowhere to displace the inferior group, then it will be eradicated altogether.

Both dislocation and extermination are present in the American expression of this. Dislocation was manifested perhaps most clearly in the pre-1850 drive to take those peoples resident to localities east of the Mississippi River and remove them physically and forcibly to localities west of it. These new localities happened to be somebody else's territory, but it was all "Indian Country," and Indians were interchangeable in the minds of the American Master Race.

After 1850, when the United States decided this "permanent Indian Country" west of the Mississippi might also be useful, a shift occurred from this policy of dislocation to one of outright extermination. This shift begot what David Savaldi has described quite properly as a "rhetoric of extermination," which was evident at every level: popular media, scholarly forums, and official policy articulations. It was quite literally an expression of a willingness, even a desire, to liquidate inferior beings who were cluttering up the landscape with their existence. They had had to be removed to make way for progress and civilization, meaning to make way for members of a superior race, a superior culture, which held a superior destiny—a manifest destiny, if you will—to utilize the land in ways it deemed to be a culmination of a civilizing impulse on the part of humanity, of which it proclaimed itself the representative.

Take the whole sweep of Manifest Destiny in the United States, which reduced the Native population by some 98 percent, and the lebensraum impulse in Germany, place them side by side, and both practically and philosophically you've got a direct correspondence. Distinctions between the two can be readily accounted for by evolutions occurring subsequent to what happened in North America, in terms of technological capacity to eradicate or displace populations and further refinement in terms of social/military organization.

DJ: Is genocide a thing of the past in the United States?

WC: There seems to be a popularly held notion that while genocide "may" have occurred, it's something that ended with the Wounded Knee massacre of 1890. This stems more than anything—aside from the emotional desire of people who are now benefiting from the legacy of genocidal policies to set themselves apart from it—from a very profound misunderstanding of the meaning of the term itself. This confusion has been inculcated in U.S. society, rather officially, through the posture of the United States government in refusing to endorse, and effectively refusing to comply with, the requirements of the United Nations Convention on Punishment and

Prevention of the Crime of Genocide from 1948 onward. Popular misperceptions go with the notion that in order to be perpetrating genocide you must engage in the outright killing of the members of those societies targeted for elimination.

Let's be clear on this. While killing large numbers of a group is mass murder, it may or may not be genocidal. Genocide is by definition the elimination of identifiable and targeted human groups as such, and you can eliminate a group-cause it to go out of existence in identifiable terms-even if every member constituting that group survives as an individual.

In the genocide convention framed by the United Nations in 1948 there are five classifications of actions that constitute genocide. The first of these has to do with killing members of a group with intent to bring about the disappearance of the group. The remaining four-80 percent of the definition-involve means other than killing to bring about the desired result.

Those perpetrating genocide can, for example, create conditions that bring about the forcible dismemberment, destruction, or dispersal of the group, so that the group is ultimately dissolved.

They can intentionally visit acute psychological or physical discomfort upon the group, so that group members "voluntarily" separate themselves and bring about the group's dissolution in order to spare themselves the individual discomfort.

They can force the transfer of the children of the group to another group at an early age and train them to see themselves as something other than a part of that cultural context into which they were born. If that happens, the culture cannot perpetuate itself and goes out of existence. That's understood to be a mechanism of genocide. It is genocidal conduct under the law.

And finally, those perpetrating genocide can prevent births within the group through involuntary sterilization or abortion. The word "involuntary" is what is at issue here. When the state imposes birth control as a matter of policy on targeted groups so they cannot conceive and/or reproduce themselves, with the ultimate intent that the group disappear, that is genocide.

Now, particularly with the forced transfer of children-the boarding school process, blind and other adoptions-which was imposed throughout Indian Country during most of the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries, you have genocidal conduct on the part of the federal government toward Indians. This was continued-and arguably it hasn't really ended-in full force at least into the last generation, which is well after the atrocities visited upon the Jews, the Gypsies, the Slavs, the Poles, and everyone else considered to be untermensch (subhuman) by the nazis.

In a couple of those generations, upwards of 80 percent of Indian children were compulsorily removed from their family and community contexts,

they have done to virtually all non-Europeans, all non-Westerners on the planet, they had to colonize themselves. These colonizers are colonized.

They too are indigenous people. Not here. But somewhere they are indigenous people, with indigenous traditions and understandings of the land, and all the things we counterpoise to the predator reality that engulfs us now. They need to get back in touch with that, you see. They must recover that which has been taken from them in the process of colonization, taken in the same fashion that things are being taken from us, now.

Euro-Americans have got to psychologically and intellectually reverse the process of colonization, to find out what went wrong for them clear back in the beginning. And then they can begin to recover knowledge of those traditions, to bring about the decolonization of Europe itself, most of all the European mind.

And it may be that we can be helpful to them in that regard, once they have recognized the need for that to occur, to get back to what it meant to be Gaelic or Celtic, to find out what Anglo-Saxon meant before the synthesis of "Europe" was effected.

When that occurs there is no more European mind, there's the human mind. I can talk to Basques and Celts. I can't talk to Europeans. Not in the sense of people who come from a given piece of geography or a people who occupy a certain mental space.

It's getting back in touch with your self, your origins, your continuity, your sense of balance in this universe. These people could never be indigenous here. It doesn't mean they can't be here. It just means they can't be indigenous here. There is a set of consequences and relations that stem from that. We can deal with that if we can properly understand it.

I talk about the landing at Jamestown, and about the pilgrim fathers coming over in 1620. I talk about what the dominant culture has done, and all of a sudden I get a bunch of red-faced, uncomfortable people talking about "white-bashing": "What? Are you talking about me?"

I reply, "Not unless you're old enough to have been around in 1620. I'm not white-bashing. I'm just recounting what happened. But you're really uncomfortable with what happened, aren't you? You're identifying with something here, and I didn't identify you with it. You did."

The light bulb goes on now. You think you're "white"-whatever that is, that's an invented term, too-and since I'm talking about white people, you feel some need to identify with them, with the perpetrators of the massacre. That's exactly the psychology that perpetuates the legacy of it. You didn't do it, so why are you defending it? You don't have to, because you can oppose it just as easily as you can embrace it. But you can't do both at once. You can separate yourself from what has been done-and what's being done. But first

Christianity, for example, is a proselytizing religion, so it's got a very wide window of public exposure. But by and large, when you're talking about indigenous traditions, you're not talking about proselytizing traditions. Instead of trying to recruit and convert, they're trying to sustain a given balance within their social orders. That cannot be done when their prime symbols become the common property of anyone who wants to walk in and play with them.

Even with Christianity, as Wendy Rose has pointed out, Catholics would resent her, an Indian, impersonating a priest. If she delivered communion in serious fashion to the faithful, you would hear an uproar among Catholics about it. Compare her hypothesis of impersonating a priest on one hand to Harley "Swift-Deer" Reagan's actual impersonation of a native spiritual leader on the other hand. Hers in a context that is relatively open to outside participation, his transgressing against traditions that are in fact not open at all. Now conceive even further that in her impersonation of a priest she mixed in a little Islamic, Buddhist, and Hindu ritual tradition as well, as if these were actually Catholic. You can amplify the shrieks and screams you're going to hear from people who believe in Catholicism. Her performance has gone beyond mere heresy into blasphemy, even obscenity. But that's what ersatz "medicine men" do as a matter of course. They mix a little Lakota, a little Dine, maybe some Shoshone with the medicine wheels, some Cherokee herbal stuff, and just a little bit of snake oil hucksterism. They stir that up and call it "indigenous spirituality" and sell it to whatever suckers are willing to buy.

In that process, they undercut the integrity, the sanctity, of the real traditions from which they draw. Undermine them enough and they'll disappear. So the whole thing we're talking about is not harmless. It's part and parcel of the overall process of genocide we've been discussing.

DJ: What can I do to rebalance my own tradition?

WC: The easy answer is to look around you and figure out what's going wrong. In a way that's an overwhelming task, because so much is going wrong. But on the other hand, it's easy because so much is going wrong that everyone can find something and go after it. Oppose. Don't go along. Resist in terms you can understand, in the context you're in, from where you are. Do not try to sidestep. Take it head on. Move on it. Force change from within the particular reality you confront now. That, in one immediate sense, causes the system to break down. It can only happen through opposition, so many forms of opposition I couldn't enumerate them all. You can be rich, poor, black, white, green, polka dot, male, female, young, old, all of it; you know there is an overwhelming mass of things you're uncomfortable with, that you know are wrong. Do something about setting one of them, or five of them, right.

But there's another thing, I think, that fits for Euro-Americans in particular. What we have to understand is that in order for Europeans to do what

taken to boarding schools, and trained to see things in terms of their oppressors' value structures and priorities. These children were denied the right to speak their language, to practice their religion, to dress in a manner allowing them to visually present themselves as being who they were. They were forcibly shorn of their hair, which has a spiritual significance in most native societies. They were raised to see themselves as integral parts of the culture—the society—that had conquered and dominated their parents. The idea was that you would have a bunch of brown-skinned, black-haired, dark-eyed people wandering around who felt and thought and considered themselves to be a part of the European tradition, having no particular knowledge or cognizance of their own tradition, and on that basis they'd systematically intermarry with whites and eventually be absorbed into the dominant population. That's a pretty quick, relatively sophisticated, effective means of getting to a genocidal result, and it was part and parcel of a formally pronounced and undertaken U.S. policy that was maintained for at least four consecutive generations.

It's what they called "assimilation." Assimilation in this sense is essentially the digestion of conquered peoples; when it was completed, the idea was that Indian societies would no longer exist in any coherent form at all. The perpetrators were very out front about this. The articulation of this concept, interestingly enough, came mainly from a group calling itself "The Friends of the Indian."

Assimilation was the "friendly" alternative to more immediate and direct forms of extermination—"be assimilated and you can continue to live." That was the choice presented to Indians by the United States, once they'd been decimated by military action, overwhelmed and subordinated. You just have to become that which you are not and abandon that which you are, altogether, forever, permanently, irrevocably. In the alternative, "hard-liners" will finish the job of physical liquidation. So you get a choice between cultural genocide and physical genocide. But it's genocide either way.

DJ: Recently I heard Russell Means talking about the horrible conditions on reservations, and someone asked him, "Why can't Indians just move to a city and get a job?"

WC: That's classic assimilationist thinking.

The reason things are bad on reservations is because the assets of the people there have been stripped away and put to the use of the dominant society. Not lawfully, not ethically, not morally; the resources have been taken through a combination of fraud, deception, and force. The "solution" implied by the questioner to the miserable conditions on the reservations is to finish the job: all the Indians need to do is go out of existence, as Indians, and they won't suffer any more.

Well, that is true, no doubt. But if you don't see anything wrong with this solution, then ipso facto you must not see anything wrong with genocide.

People try to displace responsibility for victimization onto the victims. When confronted with the facts, people in the dominant society all of a sudden can't understand the relationship between what their grandfathers did and the fact that they are now benefiting from those deeds at the direct expense of the victimized groups. They say, "We got your land, we got your resources, we got your identity, we got everything, we even want your spirituality at this point. Now, with all that said and done, let's pretend it's a 'level playing field.' Come on and get in the game with us. If you don't, then whatever happens to you is your own fault. You're just 'lazy' or 'shiftless' or otherwise 'inferior' and are therefore deserving of your fate."

Were all of this to happen to Euro-Americans, they would be every bit as bad off as Indians. In some areas, like Appalachia, they happen to be.

DJ: The American Indian Movement has taken some flak for not professing nonviolence.

WC: Indians are the most peaceful people, traditionally, you would ever wish to encounter. But if you tell any people—to their perpetual suffering, agony, disenfranchisement, dispossession, disallowal of hope—that they are irrelevant long enough, they may just prove to you, in desperation, their relevance by utilizing violence. If they blow your brains out, you see, there's no question they're relevant. This applies to Indians, Palestinians, people of the inner cities, anyone who is oppressed.

So if you don't like the possibility that we will resort to armed struggle to defend ourselves and our future generations from what is being done to us, change what is being done to us. Do that in the most nonviolent possible manner, with my blessing. But if you don't actively pursue an alteration of the context of pervasive violence to which Indians are subjected, you are in a poor position to complain if some of the violence eventually comes back at you, don't you think?

DJ: Earlier you said members of the dominant culture have taken Indian land and now want even Indian spirituality. How can someone steal spirituality?

WC: Let's take this step by step. First the land. It's gone. Native people within the contiguous forty-eight states have residual, nominal right over about 2.5 percent of their original land base. I say nominal because it's all held in trust by the federal government, with Indians having occupancy rights allowed them by the dominators. Important decision-making capacities in regard to that land are in the hands of the dominators, not the occupants. That means 97.5 percent has been taken outright.

Even by the government's own legal definition quite a lot of that was illegal. If you stretch U.S. law and its predications in English law to the absolute maximum, you still can't cover about 35 percent of the land transfers. That's the federal government's Indian Claims Commission talking

there, not Indian radicals; the commission admitted flat out it could find no basis for U.S. title to about a third of the forty-eight contiguous states, even in the most polite of interpretations.

Okay, the land's gone, the resources are gone, and even our identity is controlled by federal statute. You've got to meet a blood quantum criteria before you can be federally recognized as an Indian. The feds claim they're "protecting the sanctity" of indigenous nations through the imposition of race codes. Ask yourself: What's a nation in terms of a racial code? There is no genetic structure that is Lakota, for example; Lakota is a political and cultural designation. But that's how they've indoctrinated Indians to think. We no longer have control over, or even common sense about, our own identity, not in terms of how our peoples always understood themselves in relation to other societies, and all of those societies in relation to nature. That understanding of ourselves has been obliterated for the most part and needs to be reconstructed.

So identity has been taken, along with our land and resources. What's left? Well, there's the intellectual property of the few people who didn't get totally screwed up and "deculturated" in the other three processes of expropriation. This is a fairly thin repository of something truly Indian, and now we've got every yuppie New Ager in the universe deciding they have an inalienable right to take that, too, and use it for whatever purposes they see fit.

We can cut through this real fast with a statement that Onondaga Fire Keeper Oren Lyons has made. He said, "I'm a spiritual leader among my people, and I don't understand what you're talking about with respect to rights to our religion. We have no rights in this regard. We have responsibilities, and it seems to me that's one thing you're trying to avoid."

Couched in those terms, there would be very few New Agers who'd queue up to learn about indigenous traditions, because these people are attempting to avoid responsibility, to sidestep the heritage they're a part of. Rather than rectifying it, putting it right, putting it back in balance, they want to step out of it and appropriate something else from somebody else so they can pretend to be other than who and what they are.

This is not helpful to us, to them, or to the cosmos in general. People within a tradition that has created any sort of imbalance need to recognize that, and do what is necessary to rebalance the situation. That can only be done from within their own tradition. It cannot be done by them opting out and "becoming Indians."

Within certain parameters, nobody really cares if you want to talk about Indian religion. There are spheres that are public domain, and there are spheres that are not. That's true of indigenous spiritual traditions, and it's true of other forms of spiritual traditions. There are of course differing extents of public domain, depending on the tradition.