# AT: Afropess

Just a rando card that was written this year that is pretty good and indicts afropess

#### Blackness is not ontological – violence is contingent and social life is possible – Afropessimists are wrong

Kauanui 17 [J. Kēhaulani, Professor of American Studies and Anthropology at Wesleyan University, “Tracing Historical Specificity: Race and the Colonial Politics of (In)Capacity”, American Quarterly, Volume 69, Number 2, June 2017, pp. 257-265, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/663323>, July 10, 2017] KLu

In October 2016 I attended a lecture by Frank B. Wilderson III sponsored by Wesleyan’s Center for the Humanities. I had read his book Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of US Antagonisms, along with select articles and interviews—but had yet to hear him present his work. The talk was titled “Afro-Pessimism and the Ruse of Analogy.” I went in already critical given my familiarity with Afro-Pessimist thought—not only through his work, but that of Jared Sexton and other scholars.1 As Wilderson himself explains, Afro-Pessimism is an “unflinching paradigmatic analysis on the structures of modernity produced by slavery and genocide.” Drawing on the works of Orlando Patterson, Saidiya Hartman, and Hortense Spillers (among others), Afro-Pessimists theorize blackness as a position of accumulation and fungibility, that is, as a condition—or relation—of ontological death.2 In Red, White & Black, Wilderson theorizes the structural relation between Blacks and Humanity as an antagonism (an irreconcilable encounter) as opposed to a (reconcilable) conflict. He, along with other Afro-Pessimists, theorizes the workings of civil society as contiguous with slavery and claims the “inability of the slave to translate space into place and time into event.”3 Wilderson’s insistence of absolute negativity destroys the possibility for coalitional politics because it frames the Black Body as something that will always stand in an antagonistic position to the world.4 At Wilderson’s talk I took careful notes, and by the end of the lecture I was so perturbed, I figured I had better attend the faculty seminar the next morning to further engage. There, I mustered up the wherewithal to ask Wilderson about his argument the night before—and in his work at large—that there is no institutional capacity in which Blacks can assert leverage over anyone; that they are only instruments, not agents. I cited the case of Bacon’s Rebellion—an armed revolt in 1676 led by Nathaniel Bacon against the rule of the Virginia colonial governor William Berkeley—and asked Wilderson how he could reconcile his position in light of a tough example of black agency in uniting with indentured and other poor Europeans in committing genocidal violence against Indian tribes. He responded by asking me why I would “privilege Blacks participating in genocide over the role of whites.” I did not (and do not)—so I simply reiterated that I wanted to understand how he reconciled his argument with that particular history. He replied by asking me why I didn’t instead look to the horses they rode and the bullets they used, provided by the whites that made the Blacks mere “instruments” of their project. I noted that this was during the period prior to the hardening categories that created racially based chattel slavery in the region and that there was variation among African individuals there at that time in terms of their social and legal status. I also added that the question seemed especially pertinent given his assertions in Red, Black & White, in which much of the argument depends on his reading of Indian genocide, since he critiques “the Red Ontologist” for privileging indigenous sovereignty when genocide is essential to the ontology of the Indian.5 But this didn’t get us any farther. He pointedly told me, “We are not going to agree on this.” Given this AQ forum on Patrick Wolfe’s Traces of History: Elementary Structures of Race (2016), I want to take up his work to examine Afro-Pessimism in relation to issues raised by the exchange recounted above. I take up the question of Afro-Pessimism in this context, since Wolfe repeatedly states (and deftly demonstrates), “race is not a static ontology.”6 He notes, “As its name suggests, [race] is an ongoing, ever-shifting contest.”7 Among many other interventions, Traces of History challenges the understanding that blackness was or is transcendent. To assert blackness as ontological is to recapitulate colonizing thought, to take colonial ideology as truth. However, Wolfe went beyond merely stating that race is a social construct. As Ben Silverstein put it in his memorial essay, “Patrick insisted instead on thinking about race as one element of the Althusserian totality, an overdetermining level of the social formation.”8 Wolfe therefore brings “poststructuralist rigor to bear on materialist approaches to ideology.”9 Through his careful historical work, Wolfe theorized race as a process, examining racialization as practice alongside race as doctrine. He argued, “race is colonialism speaking.”10 In other words, European colonizers racialized the colonized in specific ways that mark and reproduce (in ways that can change across time) the unequal relationships into which colonial actors initially co-opted these populations. Wolfe’s theory enables a critique of racialization as an effect of colonialism, the working out in practice of colonial ideology. This is why he called for a shift “from the register of race to that of colonialism,” identifying dimensions of the colonial dispensation that “cannot be expressed in the language of phe- notypes.” The difference here, then, between Wolfe and Wilderson (as well as other Afro-Pessimists), is that they register not from race to colonialism, or even from race to slavery, but slavery to race. Wilderson universalizes a particular rendition of black experience to claim that the Black Body is in a perpetual state of ontological death because of the violence of the Middle Passage. He traces to when Arabs inaugurated this thirteen hundred years ago with the opening of the African slave trade.11 His main argument for the ontological death (cast in singular terms) of the Black Body is because of Blacks’ incapacity to develop their own subjectivity. As he puts it, “Blackness is incapacity in its pure and unadulterated form.”12 To get at this problematic, I offer a brief account of Bacon’s Rebellion as an example of a case in which the Black Body is not socially dead—not incapacitated. Thus I challenge the ontological absolutism that is endemic to Afro-Pessimist thought at large. Several black radical scholars have challenged this “ontological absolutism.” For example, David Marriott notes, “Wilderson is prepared to say that black suffering is not only beyond analogy, it also refigures the whole of being. It is not hard when reading such sentences to suspect a kind of absolutism at work here, and one that manages to be peculiarly and dispiritingly dogmatic.”13 Moreover, Marriott argues that the claim that “Blackness is incapacity in its most pure and unadulterated form means merely that the black has to embody this abjection without reserve. . . . This logic—and the denial of any kind of ‘ontological integrity’ to the Black/Slave due to its endless traversal by force does seem to reduce ontology to logic, namely, a logic of non-recuperability.”14 My critique here is rooted in historicizing race—that active element of racialization—races as “traces” of history. Hence, looking at the case study of Bacon’s Rebellion, I challenge Wilderson’s advancement of a purity argument that also happens to be ahistorical. I come at this debate as a scholar of sovereignty, race, and indigeneity trying to reckon with these troubling formulations.15 Bacon’s Rebellion shows that racialized chattel slavery was a deliberate choice the English elites came to over time. And here I draw on Wolfe’s Traces of History, along with the work of the historian Edmund Morgan, to offer a rudimentary overview.16 In 1619 Virginia, West Africans arrived after the Dutch sold them as slaves to the English settlers. However, the English did not immediately devise this status for them; they were not slaves in the sense of persons reduced as property and required to work for life without wages.17 In 1619 Virginia had no law legalizing slavery, and many Africans were sold as bonded laborers or indentured servants who lived and labored alongside poor Europeans—bound by contract to serve a master in order to repay the expense of their passage and other debts.18 Some worked in the fields side by side, lived together, ate together, shared housing, and more. Yet, as early as 1630, the English started singling out Africans for differential treatment, such as meting out worse punishments for running away and refusing to allow them to carry arms. Still, during this period, there were property-owning free Africans in the Chesapeake (e.g., Anthony Johnson, who arrived in 1621).19 This history shows that the course of race in seventeenth-century Virginia was not predetermined, a point more than a few historians have made.20 The plantation system and the expansion of settler capitalism that furthered English settler control over and conquest of native lands demanded additional pliant, captive labor. However, a racially based system of chattel slavery was not a foregone conclusion. As Wolfe put it: “It was not until the juridical opposition of slave versus free became mapped onto the hereditary opposition of Black versus White that being born a Black person meant being born a slave.”21 Thus, as Wolfe insists, “in addition to its circumstantial trajectory, the developing equation of Blackness with slavery needs to be understood in relation to its historicity: to the particular conditions whereby this formula rather than any other—convict labour, fixed-term slavery, a contract system—came to be selected as the optimal arrangement.”22 In 1661 the Virginia Assembly began to legally institutionalize slavery, and by 1662 came codes that determined the status of a child by the status of the mother. In 1669 the law defined enslaved Africans as property. However, planters still preferred white indentured labor. But 1670 saw a decrease in the number of European indentured servants migrating to Virginia, since Governor Berkeley had restricted suffrage to landowners. These are the conditions that contributed to Bacon’s Rebellion, as six out of seven men were “poor, discontented, and armed.”23 The insurrection emerged from the outgrowth of the push for profit from the production of tobacco, and its attendant demand for both land and labor. The complaint of freed indentured servants was they faced barriers to getting Indian land because of the emergent elite planter class. Hence it should be no surprise that Bacon’s Rebellion began with conflict over how to deal with Indian tribes viewed as violent obstructionists to settler colonial expansion. Bacon saw the colony’s policy on tribes as dismissive, especially after two Indian raids (the 1622 massacre by the Powhatans and a 1675 attack by the Doeg). His demands to preemptively massacre all Indians were not accepted by the governor, and so in response Bacon rallied his own troops against Berkeley for his refusal to retaliate for Native attacks on frontier settlements. Bacon orga- nized thousands of indentured servants, bond laborers, and slaves—English, Irish, Scottish, and African—who joined the frontier mutiny. In 1675, when Berkeley denied Bacon a commission (the authority to lead soldiers), Bacon took it upon himself to lead his followers in a crusade against the “enemy.” In a classic divide and conquer move, they marched to a fort held by a “friendly” tribe, the Occaneechees, and convinced them to capture warriors from an “unfriendly” tribe, the Susquehannock. The Occaneechees returned with captives, but Bacon’s men turned to the allied tribe and opened fire, killing them. After months of conflict, Bacon’s forces burned Jamestown to the ground on September 19, 1676. They drove Berkeley back to England and effectively shut down all tobacco production for over a year. Scholars and activists alike have perpetuated some romanticized accounts of the rebellion as a historical moment when poor Africans and Europeans united to fight their common exploiters (the English elite). Other accounts narrate it as a missed opportunity, given that poor Europeans eventually went the “white way,” joining elites against those increasingly racialized as “black.” Thus the Rebellion is also told as a genealogy of “whiteness” as a racial category and the “hidden origins” of race-based chattel slavery. As the story usually goes, the English elites, fearing class unity across racial lines, began to impose different standards when punishing the rebels—with harsher sentences against Africans. And since they were more easily identifiable than Europeans, a preference toward the importation of enslaved African slaves grew. Today, Bacon’s Rebellion is often evoked among the white Left as a reminder that elites will divide and conquer, keeping whites and Blacks from unifying. But what drops out in this lamenting account is that they were allied in challenging the English elites through their united efforts to commit genocide against indigenous peoples. This settler colonial context—imbricated with the North American institution of slavery—is often erased.24 Also, to return to Wolfe, although he links racial slavery to Indian dispossession, he does not discuss what poor Europeans and Africans were unified for besides challenging the English elite. In other words, he does not mention Bacon’s fixation on eliminating Indians through genocide and contesting Berkeley’s policy regarding the tribes. Still, Wolfe and other historians have noted that the rebellion hastened the hardening of racial lines associated with slavery, as a way for planters and the colony to control some of the poor, which led to the passage of the Virginia Slave Codes of 1705.25 After Bacon’s Rebellion, planters turned to Africa as their primary source of labor and to slavery as their main system of labor, rather than European indentured labor. The landed gentry systematically developed a workforce based on racial caste, and the 1680 Virginia legislature enacted laws that denied slaves freedom of mobility and assembly. New legislation sharpened the color line, and by 1710 a racially based system of chattel slavery was fixed in Virginia (and Maryland).26 Wolfe’s treatment of racial formation on black slavery and racial caste in Traces of History is key to understanding the aftermath of the revolt. He shows how race is constructed to challenge the ahistorical and universal claim that Afro-Pessimists hold. Returning to Wilderson, then, Bacon’s Rebellion offers just one example in which Blacks (in Wilderson’s terms)—or, rather, Africans not yet “Black”—exercised some capacity over another group. But, while they asserted leverage over tribes, as agents in unity with poor Europeans, the terms of agency were set by and defined within the settler racial capitalist system that was also oppressing them.27 And unlike European workers, who were exploited, the Dutch enslaved the Africans before selling them as “cargo” in North America. This is a crucial difference demarcating the vast structural differences impinging on them. Still, this historical episode challenges the timeline Wilderson claims regarding the ontological imprint and its inauguration. The specificity of racially based chattel slavery in the context of English settlement in North America—and the institutional incapacity it wrought for enslaved Africans—differs from the Middle Ages in the Arab world. It is as if Wilderson were drawing on the particularity of the experiences of African peoples in North America to make a universal argument. Furthermore, he reads “Black” outside the history of the making of race that this historical period shows was a process. This totalizing interpretation of black experience in claiming that “the Black Body” is in a perpetual state of ontological death, then, seems bound to this historically specific context, all the while disavowing that specificity. Tamar Blickstein, a mutual friend of Wolfe’s and mine, recently reminded me that Patrick said that he hoped Traces of History would be something people “could run with.” I hope that taking his work and running with it— to critically examine the argument that “Blackness is incapacity in its pure and unadulterated form”—elucidates the colonial and racial politics of what constitutes capacity in terms of agency. Attention to the rebellion, then, also illustrates the problems with ahistorical projections of blackness across space and time, showing that we must attend to how this category gets constructed in place and time—and in relation to colonial and capitalist systems. Instead of seeing Bacon’s rebellion as a missed opportunity for poor European and poor Africans, the historical event reveals a lost chance for alliance politics between African and indigenous peoples.28 Wolfe insisted that addressing questions of solidarity must include a consideration of the legacies (the functions and outcomes) of racialization. He made it clear in Traces of History that it is necessary to interrogate racial categories and complementarities, refusing simple solidarities and examining the material structures—and consequences—of colonial rule. Seeing how colonial elites pitted one against the other, in the aftermath of Bacon’s Rebellion, in a crosscutting system of oppression, offers a counterpoint and alternative framework to the nihilism of Afro-Pessimism, one that challenges ontological absolutism. Resisting the insistence of absolute negativity that destroys the possibility for coalitional politics, we can and must open up space for interconnected radical intellectual and political projects.