

Title—Traces of History: Elementary Structures of Race
Author—Patrick Wolfe
Year—2016

Categories: Theory, Race, Gender, Colonialism

Place: The World

Time: 1760-Present

Argument Synopsis:

Traces of History is concerned with the way that racialization works as a process in concert with colonialism, and specifically settler colonialism. Wolfe attempts to answer these questions: how are races constructed? Under what circumstances? And in whose interests? Broadly, Wolfe aims to highlight the relatively new-ness of the concept of race, dating only to the late eighteenth century. Race is central to the process of colonialism, as it warrants uneven standards of treatment for different human groups. Racialization represents a response to the crisis occasioned when colonizers are threatened with the requirement to share social space with the colonized. Wolfe argues that the versatility of race as a concept is central to its heterogeneity, which enables it to be applied to various diverse contexts.

He begins with a discussion of the colonization of Australia, underscoring the ways that it differed from Britain's previous colonization of North America. Wolfe reveals that in both cases, the United States and Australia, there were concerted campaigns of Native assimilation that occurred upon the ending of the frontier period. Wolfe then shifts from the racialization of Black people in Australia to the racialization of Black people in the United States. He posits that Indigenous and Black people were racialized differently in the United States to fulfill different goals; he claims that Indigenous people were targeted for assimilation, while Black people were marginalized through the one-drop rule as a means of continuing the system of chattel slavery.

The second section of the book is focused on two case studies. The first is concerned with the dispossession of Natives in the United States, specifically at the end of the frontier period. Wolfe begins with tracing the process through which Indian's progressive containment within the federal body politic was registered and enacted in U.S. Indian policy. This case study is explicitly concerned with the concept of mixed-bloodedness, arguing that it became the post-frontier version of the Vanishing Indian. Wolfe claims that once Indigenous people became confined to reservations, they, in effect, became prisoners of war. He interrogates the system of blood quantum discourse, and how it effectively turned Indigenous people into chameleons as they moved on and off reservations. The other case study is focused on the dispossession of Palestinians due to the ideology of Zionism. According to Wolfe, Zionism can be read as a revealing archive into the logic of settler colonialism because it represents a prime example of deliberate, explicit planning. Wolfe posits that the creation of the Jewish state and the ethnic cleansing of Palestine were two sides of the same coin. He concludes with the hope that because race is historically contingent, it can be overcome. In particular, he identifies the incompleteness of racial domination as a source of hope for the future.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- Colonized people continue to be racialized in specific ways that mark out and reproduce the unequal relationships into which Europeans have co-opted these populations
- Race is colonialism speaking; the concepts are intimately linked
- Settler colonialism is governed by a logic of elimination in regards to Indigenous populations