

***Theorizing Race in the Americas: Douglass, Sarmiento, Du Bois, and Vasconcelos*
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Juliet Hooker's *Theorizing Race in the Americas: Douglass, Sarmiento, Du Bois, and Vasconcelos* is a sophisticated, original and rich account of the work of these four *hemispheric American* thinkers. Frederick Douglass, Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, W.E.B. Du Bois, and José Vasconcelos have all received significant scholarly attention individually, often on the basis of a few key texts, and as representative of either Latin American or African American political thought. Hooker's innovation is to read a broad selection of each author's work in the context of a shared hemispheric "political and intellectual terrain" or "common discursive field" (6, 17). While these authors were not in direct conversation and their work varies by virtue of geography, history, subject positions, ideologies and personal and political investments, all four authors' work was informed by concerns with scientific racism, *mestizaje*, imperialism, democratic citizenship and political unity and by the experiences of the "other America" to the South or to the North. "For each tradition," explains Hooker, "the other therefore functions at difference moments as antithesis, object lesson, model and aspiration" (3).

Comparison has become an increasingly important method for incorporating the study of non-Western or non-European and non-North American political thought into the field of political theory. According to Hooker, Douglass, Sarmiento, Du Bois, and Vasconcelos themselves relied upon the trope of comparison by "creatively misreading" the other America in an attempt to address issues specific to their time and place. In showing how this frequently meant distorting or privileging one element of the comparison over the other, Hooker illustrates some of the pitfalls of comparison. As an alternative method for reading these same thinkers, Hooker proposes juxtaposition, defined as a "historical-interpretive approach that seeks to situate the resonances and/or discontinuities between traditions of thought within the specific historical, intellectual, cultural and socio-economic contexts in which they emerged" (13). This method, however, is not one simply imposed from without, but is rather one that her hemispheric analysis both points to and demands. Indeed, she sees elements of it in the work of Du Bois who juxtaposed different genres and forms as a way of achieving the theoretical complexity his subject required. Moreover, none of the political thinkers she discusses relied upon conventional forms of political theory but instead blurred the lines between fiction, history, biography, narrative, science and other disciplines as a way of achieving particular political ends (to dispute specific arguments, but also to paint an alternative future). By selecting political thinkers from two subaltern traditions—Latin American and African American political thought—that are not easily privileged over the other, she

facilitates the work of juxtaposition. Hooker reminds us that the theorists we choose to analyze inform the types of comparisons we make. By staging a dialogue between hemispheric thinkers who were not in direct conversation, Hooker shows the ways that ideas travel and transform through time, region and especially particular political debates. Each of the four main chapters of the book, then, traces the ways each thinker's ideas developed and responded to their understanding of historical and political events in the hemisphere.

The first chapter of the book traces the links between Frederick Douglass's views on racial politics and U.S. immigration, on the one hand, and U.S. expansionism and multiracial democracy, on the other. According to Hooker, Douglass's views on democracy were "informed by a tradition of black fugitive thought that takes as its starting point the search for the freedom of the enslaved" (19). Through his life, she argues, Douglass swung between a commitment to the possibility of a perfected U.S. multi-racial democracy and skepticism about the possibility of reconstituting such a polity on a foundation of slavery and white supremacy (57). Rather than understanding this ambivalence and shifts in his thought abstractly or in terms of a strict chronology, Hooker insists we view them in the context of Douglass's own engagement with the Caribbean and Central America and with dominant arguments about U.S. expansion. In the 19th century, supporters of U.S. expansion often justified it as a way of extending slavery, and then, following the abolition of slavery, opposed expansion because it would increase the U.S.'s non-white population. Inverting this same logic, Douglass supported U.S. expansion and U.S. immigration as a way of furthering his project of "decentering whiteness in U.S. democracy" (49). Douglass, argues Hooker, "took a nightmare scenario of the racist anti-annexionists and reshaped it into a fugitive democratic vista in which US democracy would be enhanced by having a 'black sister in Massachusetts' of Caribbean origin and non-white immigrants from around the globe" (56). Douglass's own optimism about the possibility of a multiracial democracy in the United States and thus the beneficial effects of non-white immigration emerged during Reconstruction, which he believed to be a "permanent democratic recomposition" (56). At the same time, Douglass saw inspiration outside the U.S. and specifically in the Haitian Revolution, which he saw "as part of the political legacy of the Americas," as part of the "diasporic currents of circulation of ideas practices, not only of slavery, but also freedom" (63). His political thought was thus always informed by the limits and possibilities he saw in the Americas.

In chapter two, Hooker moves to South America for a treatment of 19th century Argentine intellectual and statesman Domingo F. Sarmiento, who is best known for his 1845 text *Facundo or, Civilization and Barbarism*, in which he famously contrasted the barbarism of the Argentine plains to the civilization of the European influenced Argentine cities and attributed the civil war and the rise of caudillismo to the former. However, focusing only on this text, argues Hooker, ignores how Sarmiento, supposed admirer of everything European, later turned to the United States in lesser known texts such as *Vida de Abran Lincoln* (1866) and *Viajes en Europa, Africa y América* 1845-1847 (1851), as a model and source of lessons for Argentina (67). This turn to the United

States marked a turn away from the “civilization/barbarism binary” of *Facundo* and toward a greater concern with democracy and its connection to public education, which, Sarmiento had decided, was better served in the United States than in Europe. His disillusionment with European “progress,” however, did necessarily mean that Sarmiento had a better understanding of U.S. history and politics (84-85). As Hooker deftly shows, Sarmiento selectively read U.S. history, and specifically the U.S. Civil War, ignoring the terror of slavery and its key role in the Civil War and attributing slavery’s existence solely to the British (86-87). He viewed the U.S. Civil War through the lens of his understanding of Argentina’s civil war, as a struggle between civilization and barbarism, as primarily a dispute between federalists and Unitarians, and as a project of rehabilitating poor whites and blacks in the South through public education (98). As Hooker writes, “Sarmiento saw echoes of ‘his’ America everywhere in the U.S. South in the 1860s; it was a mirror that constantly reflected back (his understanding of) Argentine realities” (94).

In Chapter three on W.E.B. Du Bois, Hooker argues that the focus on texts like *Souls of Black Folk* (1903) has led readers to wrongly conclude that Du Bois saw a fixed, static, occasionally essentialist, black identity as key to African American liberation. However, a more comprehensive approach to his work, that includes later texts like *Darkwater* (1920) and *Dark Princes* (1928), shows that Du Bois increasingly moved beyond the bounds of the U.S. to envision global movements of people of color and he enlisted the “iconography of mixture” in this project (113). Rather than reading Du Bois as a racial essentialist, Hooker suggests understanding his arguments contextually, as a response to a larger political terrain, in which mixing and arguments for or against it took on different valences. Thus, just as with Douglass, it was not a story of the “development” or evolution of his ideas, or conversely, hypocrisy, but instead one that shows that abstract ideas and positions look different once they are situated. For instance, Du Bois worried about intermarriage as a strategy of liberation and anti-racism *in the context of* white supremacy where whiteness was privileged. However, he also opposed anti-miscegenation laws because he believed they violated the rights of black individuals to choose whom to love and marry and because of the racist assumptions upon which they were based (128-130). Similarly, Du Bois’s disillusionment with the U.S. led him to look to the Global South but his fictional accounts of racial mixing and intimacy were both romantic *and* tragic, aimed less at affirming an existing set of relations elsewhere than at pointing beyond a “black-white racial binary that constrained conceptions of racial justice and anti-colonial liberation” (134-135). Indeed, Du Bois praised the blurring of the color line in the Caribbean while also recognizing the poverty of the region and thus resisting the temptation to treat racial mixing as a panacea that would necessarily address the myriad problems of colonialism (143). Once repositioned as a theorist of *mestizaje*, Du Bois and Afro-American political thought more generally, argues Hooker, becomes not a counterpoint to Latin American political thought, but part of a larger hemispheric tradition of which both are part.

In chapter four, Hooker turns to the one of the most well-known Latin American theorists of *mestizaje*, José Vasconcelos, and to Latino Political Thought's appropriation of him. As with the other chapters, Hooker calls for reading widely and contextually. Thus, she treats not just his most famous text, *The Cosmic Race* (1925), but also *Indologia* (1926), the latter in which Hooker locates significant differences including a "more positive portrayal of black and indigenous Latin Americans" and an "incipient critique of the identification with whiteness of Latin American elites" (169). Two readings of Vasconcelos have tended to dominate the literature. One reading, found in much Latino political thought, highlights his celebration of *mestizaje* at the expense of the racist and essentialist assumptions underlying this account and the ways in which race relations in Latin America bely this celebration. Another reading points to the racism of *The Cosmic Race*, ignoring both his other work and the cocktail of U.S. imperialism and scientific racism that informed the hemispheric environment in which the book was written and published. Hooker does not directly contradict either reading. Indeed, she points to the way that Gloria Anzaldúa selectively misread *The Cosmic Race*, drawing on his celebration of Latin American *mestizaje* in order to privilege an idealized so-called "color blind" Latin American approach to race in the context of the (presumably more racist United States). Such a reading actively ignores the racial politics and realities of both North and South. Hooker argues that a selective reading that unmoors Vasconcelos "from the intellectual and historical context in which it was formulated" risks ignoring the racist ends to which an unabashed celebration of *mestizaje* can be put and, at the same time, empties it of "its most potentially radical critique," the call for Latin American elites to disidentify with whiteness as a form of anti-imperialist practice (and additionally, to treat what were long described as Latin American defects as virtues) (194).

Given that the sources of these creative misreadings were both texts and historical events and given that the purposes to which these readings were put were diverse, one wonders about how we might distinguish between the different types of readings presented in the book. Specifically, what makes a "misreading" creative and not simply a misreading, a creative reading or perhaps a "selective reading"? To root this question in the arguments of the text itself, is there a difference, for instance, between Sarmiento's selective reading of the U.S. Civil War and Douglass's creative misreading of the situation in Santo Domingo? While one might say Douglass creatively reused racist arguments against expansion in support of multiracial democracy in the U.S., his support for annexation of Santo Domingo also ignored the specific context of Santo Domingo. What makes his reading creative and not selective? How do Sarmiento's and Douglass's readings compare to Anzaldúa's and Latino Political Thought's "selective reading" of Vasconcelos, which not only idealizes race in the Americas, but also empties his argument of all its most radical elements? Hooker seems to suggest that Douglass's reading is qualitatively different than that of Sarmiento and Anzaldúa. Is this due to the ideologies or politics driving them or the results produced? Is it about selective use of facts or incorrect analysis? Is it about failing to consider the context in which ideas emerge and/or where they land? Given the importance of fictions and multiple genres and forms used in the work of the thinkers

treated and the fact that all of them were attempting not just to describe reality, but transform it, these questions are particularly important. In short, if there something liberatory and utopian about misreading, how can we distinguish between different types of misreadings?

All these questions emerge out of the richness of Hooker's account of these hemispheric thinkers. Her book brilliantly shows how political thought must always be read in the context of political debates and multiple considerations. It reminds us that political thought is not static and always involves making calculations about the costs and benefits of specific positions. The book makes both a substantive and methodological contribution to the field of comparative political theory, where relatively little attention has been paid to African-American and Latin American political thought and the hemispheric dimensions of these tradition and where comparison, though oft criticized, remains the dominant mode of analysis.
