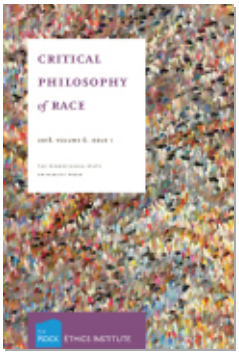
Theorizing Race in the Americas: Douglass, Sarmiento, Du Bois, and Vasconcelos by Juliet Hooker (review)



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BOOK REVIEWS

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* (2017) is an outstanding scholarly work within contemporary political philosophy. While the book itself offers a compelling set of analyses regarding race, national and pan-national identities, and democratic theory, it is Hooker's scope, methodological innovativeness, and theoretical complexity that make the work exceptional. Hooker's analytic focus addresses political theory across several U.S. African American and Latin American contexts, and provides a novel approach to the study of four major figures within these respective fields. Namely, the book surveys the writings of Frederick Douglass, Domingo Faustino Sarmiento, W. E. B. Du Bois, and José Vasconcelos. More specifically, she examines how each thinker interprets race through a hemispheric lens across the Americas. For example, she analyzes how Douglass and Du Bois, in their efforts to understand and interpret their own domestic and, at times, international political concerns, each discussed Latin American models of miscegenation, immigration policy, and political mobilization strategies among Afro-descendent communities in Central America, South America, and the Caribbean. Similarly, the book analyzes Sarmiento's and Vasconcelos's respective conceptions of U.S. policies on abolitionism, segregation, and education, and the

two theorists' considerations of these issues for Latin American forms of national cohesion and stability. As such, *Theorizing Race in the Americas*, both through its method and content, successfully bridges discourses of race that are rarely explored together within political theory. In what follows, I briefly frame some of the major methodological and theoretical contributions that *Theorizing Race in the Americas* offers to contemporary scholars interested in U.S. African American and Latin American political thought. I then examine several points for further research that Hooker's work invites from readers.

The book is organized into two main sections. The first, "*Ambas Américas*" (Both Americas), takes up the work of Douglass and Sarmiento, two thinkers whose writings and active political lives spanned the nineteenth century. Notably, both thinkers published their first major works in 1845. Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* was published in Boston less than seven years after he escaped from slavery, and Sarmiento's *Facundo: Civilization and Barbarism* was published that same year in Santiago, Chile, while the author was living in exile from his birthplace of Argentina. Hooker notes that these thinkers are never read alongside one another, despite their immense political influence. The reasons for this, she proposes, are likely that the respective thinkers never engaged one another's work, and, given their geopolitical locations, are often considered to have very different preoccupations with respect to race (1). Douglass's political interventions focused largely on abolitionism and anti-black racism in the United States, while Sarmiento's principle interests were in securing post-independence forms of republicanism across Latin America, which included, for Sarmiento, an unambiguous form of anti-indigenous racism that he considered necessary to ensure political unity. Against this trend, Hooker situates these two thinkers in relation to one another to examine their overlapping positions vis-à-vis race, democratic theory, and the continued relevance of their respective political views.

The second part of the book, titled "Mestizo Futurisms," examines questions regarding political progress, racial mixing/*mestizaje*, and transnational networks of solidarity via the writings of Du Bois and Vasconcelos. Both Du Bois and Vasconcelos were immensely influential early- to mid-twentieth-century political figures and writers, and their respective works sought, to varying degrees, to build on the earlier efforts of their predecessors (Douglass in the case of Du Bois, and Sarmiento in the case of Vasconcelos). However, as with Sarmiento and Douglass, these two authors

are rarely read in relation to one another. Again, the reasons for this are that the two are often considered to hold starkly different positions regarding race. For example, Du Bois's early writing on the continued relevance of race in "The Conservation of Races" (1897) is sometimes seen as evidence that he held "a rigid, essentialist conception of race that militated against any acknowledgement of mixture" (124). Vasconcelos's *La raza cósmica* (1925), on the other hand, is often considered a foundational work in Latin American theorizations of *mestizaje*, a view that is often interpreted as a form of racial optimism reliant upon biological and cultural mixture as a solution for problems of political unrest. Despite these commonly-held conceptions of their respective works, Hooker reads these authors in a new light, focusing on less commonly engaged texts in each authors' corpus. Hooker focuses on Du Bois's fictional writings *Dark Princess* (1928) and "The Comet" (1920), which she calls his "mulatto fictions" that she considers through the lens of the aesthetic and literary movement of Afro-futurism. She thus positions these works as counterevidence to views of Du Bois that consider his conception of race to be essentialist or non-dynamic. Likewise, for Vasconcelos, Hooker reads lesser known texts from his corpus such as *Indología* (1926) and *Bolivarismo y Monroísmo* (1934) to demonstrate the author's more radical criticisms of global white supremacy, U.S. interventionism, and anti-Latina/o racism in the United States (160).

To analyze these vastly distinct thinkers and geopolitical contexts together is no easy task, and Hooker takes immense care to tie together these seemingly disparate bodies of political theory. One significant point of overlap across all four theorists, she proposes, is their "shared albatross: scientific racism" (5). That is, all four thinkers are immersed in philosophical and political traditions that must grapple with the tremendous outpouring of scientific writings, conferences, and debates about the relative inferiority and superiority of racial groups. Hooker thus situates Douglass and Sarmiento within a period of scientific racism spanning from 1850–1890 that focused primarily on questions regarding whether different racial groupings were descended from common origins (e.g. debates regarding monogenesis or polygenesis), and questions regarding the influence of climate and geography on the supposed inferiority and degeneration of nonwhite groups. For Du Bois and Vasconcelos, she argues, the racist science of eugenics spans 1890 to 1940 and influenced the writings of both thinkers. Moreover, both Du Bois and Vasconcelos, Hooker writes, "had a shared intellectual foe in racist science, particularly the ideas of US

eugenicist Madison Grant" (9). Considerations over the ability to "improve" human societies by determining which racial groups were "fit" and "unfit" for continued survival and "civilization" were common concerns among eugenicists, including those in Grant's *The Passing of the Great Race or the Racial Basis of European History* (1916) (10). This shared scientific context for Du Bois and Vasconcelos provides a pivotal connection between their respective writings.

Given these shared resonances, it is important to highlight the innovative methodology that Hooker employs to study both U.S. African American and Latin American political thought. Namely, she develops what she describes as a practice of "juxtaposition," an approach that she contrasts with a more common form of analysis in political thought that she calls "comparison." Unlike comparative methods for transnational analyses of race, juxtaposition interrogates "the boundaries between traditions as contingent products of political power" (13). Thus, instead of assuming that each geopolitical context is itself a fixed entity or that each thinker is solely influenced by his given national context, Hooker adopts a robustly "historical-interpretive approach that seeks to situate the resonances and/or discontinuities between traditions of thought within the specific historical, intellectual, cultural, and socioeconomic contexts in which they emerged" (13). Hooker also elaborates a second feature of comparative approaches that she seeks to reject as well, namely, the comparative exercise of ranking differing racial politics across distinct geopolitical contexts. In *Theorizing Race in the Americas*, however, rather than studying U.S. African American and Latin American political theorists alongside one another for the sake of arriving "at an assessment of which of these two traditions has formulated the better approach to race," Hooker offers a method that seeks to examine how theorists from these traditions have themselves often engaged in such forms of comparative assessment (12). Thus, she interrogates how each thinker has often ended up misreading or mistakenly looking to "the other America" as a site of racial progress or decline (12). For example, with respect to Douglass, she examines the author's writings and editorial work that engages the political efforts of Black, indigenous, and mixed-race populations in Haiti, Santo Domingo (what is now the Dominican Republic), and in Nicaragua's Mosquito Coast. In Sarmiento's writings, she examines his correspondence with U.S. educational reformer, teacher, and abolitionist, Mary Mann, in which both interlocutors discuss their respective views on Black suffrage and the education of freed ex-slave populations (94).

One additional thread that juxtaposition helps outline—and a recurrent theme throughout the book—is how conceptions of the possibility of stable political futures can often become based in comparative methods of analysis as well. That is, the possibility of political harmony *elsewhere* can provide the normative means to motivate *local* efforts toward social reorganization. Yet, as Hooker highlights throughout the book, the consequences of these forms of comparative ranking can often lead to political consequences that may be antithetical to contemporary decolonization efforts. U.S. interventionism, for example, can be justified on a similar comparative premise, and Hooker does not overlook Latin American concerns about U.S. imperial and economic expansionism. Specifically, her chapters on Douglass, Sarmiento, and Vasconcelos each engage extensively with problems of U.S. expansionism. A similar consequence of such forms of comparison can be found in Hooker's critical attention to discourses of racial harmony within Latin America, which often present overly generous and misleading interpretations of the rights of Afro-descendant and indigenous populations in Latin America.

With this methodological framing in place, Hooker also remains attentive to questions regarding transnational solidarity among racialized populations. Her chapter on Du Bois's Afro-futurist fiction provides a compelling reinterpretation of Du Bois as a theorist embroiled in the pursuit of global anti-colonial, and antiracist revolutionary politics. The formulation of global anti-colonial and antiracist struggle in the book harkens back to Hooker's concise studies of political solidarity and collective rights for Afro-descendent and indigenous peoples in Latin America (e.g. 2008, 2009a; 2009b), and her critical approaches to mestizo nationalism, contemporary multiculturalism, and "Latino racial exceptionalism"[1] appear to build from her earlier writings in this vein as well (e.g. 2005a; 2005b; 2014).

Additionally, Hooker's analysis of black fugitivity and democratic fugitivity in Douglass's thought carefully mark the tensions between these two traditions, and she presents Douglass's contributions to democratic theory as a concerted effort toward transnational Black solidarity (29; 57). More specifically, Hooker draws from the work of Sheldon Wolin (1994), Neil Roberts (2015), and Anthony Bogues (2012) to place Douglass "squarely within [both] the tradition of black fugitive thought" and fugitive democratic theory (34). She thus frames the tensions between these views as a set of disagreements about the role of the state as a site for Black freedom. Fugitive democracy, she writes, "would seek to reshape the moral

dispositions of the dominant racial order, [while] black fugitivity is oriented instead to the creation of sites of black freedom that refuse of challenge the logics of coloniality and exceed or bypass the nation-state" (39). With these tensions in mind, she reads Douglass's writings on the annexation of Santo Domingo and his political involvement in the controversy regarding the Haitian port of Môle St. Nicolas in the 1890s as evidence for his oscillation "between the two polarities of democratic and fugitive hope" (57). In this sense, Douglass's position on the possibility of an impermanent and contingent form of democratic freedom via the modern nation-state, and his search for sites of Black freedom that exceed the white supremacist foundations of the modern nation-state become evident through Hooker's close readings of his work.

Hooker's text is thus groundbreaking in many ways, and the scope of her scholarship speaks to the immense philosophical contributions that are possible when political theorists are trained to contextually analyze differing geographic, historical, and linguistic traditions. As such, I consider *Theorizing Race in the Americas* a welcomed invitation to engage in further transnational studies of race. To demonstrate how the book encourages this work, I offer here a few points for further extension and critique in response to a few of Hooker's analyses offered in the book.

First, one potential area of analysis offered via Hooker's chapter on Sarmiento is further investigation into the relationship between Sarmiento's writings on race and evolutionary theory. Hooker argues that the U.S. school of ethnology and Louis Agassiz, a prominent critic of evolutionary theory and of Darwin, were quite influential for Sarmiento's thinking about race, and their influence can be found in his 1883 work *Conflicto y armonías de razas en América*. This reading of Sarmiento also shapes the way in which Hooker situates Sarmiento's work in relation to the United States. She proposes that by 1847 the author "turned away from Europe as his political model and looked to the United States instead" (80). While Hooker provides a thorough analysis of the invocations of Agassiz in his writings, and suggests a decline of his interest in "Europeanizing" Latin America by his 1860s writings, there are several other potential avenues to explore to contextualize this period of his thinking as well. For example, one body of scholarship on Sarmiento's writings focuses specifically on his interest in Darwinian evolutionary theory. In this vein, Adriana Novoa and Alex Levine (2010) trace how Sarmiento showed great interest, like many of his contemporaries, with evolutionary theory throughout his corpus.

In his 1850 *Recuerdos de provincia*, for instance, he appears to demonstrate a belief in the inheritance of acquired traits, a view popularized in Argentina via the writings of French naturalist Jean-Baptiste Lamarck (38). Moreover, in an autobiographical work in 1886, Sarmiento writes of his early interests specifically in Darwin, stating that he bought the sixth edition of Scottish evolutionary theorist Robert Chambers's book *Vestiges of the Natural History of Creation* in 1847 while visiting London. Sarmiento states explicitly that this book "prepared" his thinking on evolution prior to Darwin's 1859 *On the Origin of Species* (Novoa and Levine 39). Novoa and Levine also note that, in 1868 after recently traveling to the U.S., Sarmiento writes of his familiarity with the disputes between Agassiz and Darwin, and asserts that "Darwin's theory was Argentine" (77), and that Sarmiento sought, in his own words, to "nationalize it" within the country.

The significance for Sarmiento's invocations of Darwin will be most apparent to readers of *Theorizing Race in the Americas* who are familiar with mid- to late-nineteenth century evolutionary theory and debates about how differing views within the biological sciences impacted conceptions of race during the period. These included, for example, discussions about degeneracy, miscegenation, and educational reform. Sarmiento, as Novoa and Levine propose, attempted to "add design to Darwin" despite his apparent acknowledgement that such a stance on directed variation was inconsistent with Darwin's own position (77). Sarmiento also wrote in 1883 in a letter to Francisco Moreno, a prominent naturalist of the period, that "I get along with [Herbert] Spencer. We follow the same path" (168). Given, these references to his own thinking about Spencer and Darwin, further examinations of this period in Sarmiento's writings may be important to determine the extent to which U.S. ethnology, Agassiz, and the United States as a site for discourses on race was pivotal for Sarmiento.

Another interpretive possibility may be, as Sarmiento's eulogy for Darwin in May of 1882 suggests, that Sarmiento gave preference to Darwin's evolutionary theory above Agassiz's. For example, he writes in that address, regarding Agassiz's expedition to Brazil in the 1860s in which Agassiz studied varieties of fish found in the Amazon River system, that Agassiz supposedly confesses in his writings that he found evidence that supported Darwinian evolutionary theory and monogenesis. Despite this somewhat misleading interpretation of Agassiz's work, the conclusion that Sarmiento offers is the claim that "we who are satisfied with fewer species of fish in our rivers, let us be content, then, with the near confession of

one who searched the Amazon in search of evidence with which to combat transformationist ideas and failed to find it" (Sarmiento [1882] 2012, 137). "Transformationism" in this context refers, roughly, to the view that one species evolves into another, a view that Agassiz explicitly denied. Moreover, he follows this statement with the claim that further evidence against Agassiz's views can be found and supported by the work of the Argentine naturalist and Darwinist thinker, Florentino Ameghino.

This point regarding Sarmiento's relationship to Darwinism, however, is not a determining factor for whether or not he maintained a fervently anti-indigenous form of racism or patronizing views of Afro-descendent peoples, as Hooker astutely discusses in the book (107). The issue here is how Sarmiento's readers ought to interpret his views regarding evolutionary theory and to what extent these views impacted his conclusions about miscegenation, racial progress/degeneracy, and education. As such, Hooker's book invites further analysis within political theory on the influence of Agassiz, Ameghino, Darwin, Spencer, and other scientists of the period within Argentine and other Latin American and U.S. debates regarding race.

Additionally, Hooker's attention to the role and function of Vasconcelos's conception of *mestizaje* within Gloria Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La frontera* (1987) is another provocative site of analysis in the book. Hooker states that Anzaldúa "'queers' *mestizaje* by highlighting queer, female, Chicanas as the pre-eminent U.S. Latino subject," and thereby attempts "to reimagine *mestizaje* in more racially egalitarian terms" than those of Vasconcelos (189; 191). However, Hooker also argues that Anzaldúa was "not able to fully escape the problematic inheritance of Vasconcelos's racial and gender politics" because "she did not formulate an explicit critique of the way harmonious narratives of mestizaje erased the sexual violence that was an integral part of the cultural and corporeal encounters that gave rise to the new mestizo subject" (192). As such, she writes that this omission "precluded her from formulating a full intersectional critique of his theory of mestizaje" (192).

From these passages, readers of Anzaldúa's corpus may be surprised to hear this critique in light of the numerous places throughout *Borderlands/La frontera* in which Anzaldúa addresses sexual violence during the conquest of what is today considered Mexico, and her critical analysis of the continued violation, degradation, and humiliation of women of color that has persisted since. For example, one such overlooked passage by Hooker comes near the beginning of *Borderlands/La frontera* wherein Anzaldúa

describes *mestizo* nationalistic forms of hatred and betrayal that are attributed to *La Malinche/Malinali Tenepat*, the enslaved indigenous woman who was gifted to the conquistador, Hernán Cortés. Anzaldúa writes,

> *Malinali Tenepat* or *Malintzín*, has become known as *la chingada*—the fucked one. . . . Whore, prostitute, the woman who sold out her people to the Spaniards are epithets Chicanos spit out with contempt . . . The dark-skinned woman has been silenced, gagged, caged, bound into servitude with marriage, bludgeoned for 300 years, sterilized and castrated in the twentieth century. For 300 years she has been a slave, a force of cheap labor, colonized by the Spaniard, the Anglo, by her own people (and in Mesoamerica her lot under the Indian patriarchs was not free of wounding). (44–45)

This passage comes well before Anzaldúa's invocation of Vasconcelos, and, as such, is an early place in *Borderlands/La frontera* where she explicitly discusses sexual violence against women of color. Also, in the following chapter, she describes *Malinche* as "the raped mother whom we have abandoned," and, in "*La conciencia de la mestiza*/Towards a New Consciousness," the chapter in which she cites Vasconcelos, she includes a section in which she explicitly condemns the numerous forms of violence that exist in "Mexican-Indian culture," including a reference to sexual violence (i.e. "they wound us, violate us") (106). Notably, Anzaldúa discusses rape and the sexual violence of women of color throughout the book.[2] Thus, while it is true that Anzaldúa does not directly critique the Vasconcelian version of *mestizaje* in particular, she does critique the trope of racial and sexual harmony offered via the notion of *mestizaje* more generally. As such, readers of Anzaldúa's writings may find Hooker's analysis of the thinker somewhat puzzling and potentially uncharitable. This seems even more apparent given that Hooker states explicitly in a footnote that she recognizes that she did not remain consistent with her own book's "methodological call to read broadly beyond a thinker's most iconic texts" in order to address Anzaldúa's broader body of work (245). This methodological omission, and Hooker's lack of references to the immense secondary literature on Anzaldúa's conception of *mestizaje* may, then, leave some readers of the book unconvinced by her critique of the author.[3]

Despite these potential areas for further analysis and critique, *Theorizing Race in the Americas* makes many significant contributions to studies of

race across U.S African America, Latin American, and U.S. Latina/o political studies. Readers of the book will be pleased to find a number of comprehensively researched and well-crafted arguments that methodologically "juxtapose" important debates within political philosophy and critical race theory. I thus hope Hooker's text becomes an invitation to scholars for more hemispheric and transnational analyses of race, gender and sexual politics, and international struggles for antiracist and anticolonial solidarity.

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NOTES

1. Latino racial exceptionalism is the view that "Latinos challenge the U.S. binary racial order and deconstruct race by introducing Latin America's more complex notions of racial identity and superior approach to race relations" (204).
2. See, for example, references to sexual violence in *Borderlands/La frontera*, 3, 12, 30, 34, 80, and 90.
3. See, for example, Alarcón 1989; Arrizón 2006; Barvosa 2008; Delgadillo 2011; Keating 2005; Ortega 2016; Saldaña-Portillo 2001.

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